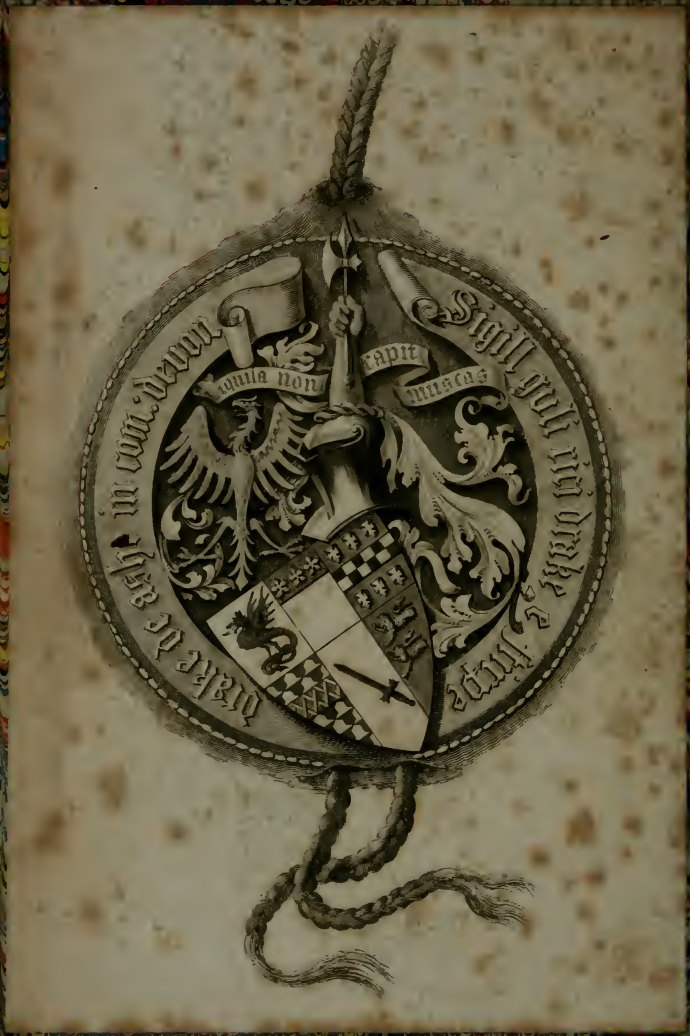

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LETTERS

ON THE

CHARACTER AND POETICAL GENIUS

OF

LORD BYRON.

BY

SIR EGERTON BRYDGES, BART.

&c. &c. &c.

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Tr. R.
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PREFACE.

More than twenty of the first of these letters were written with little intention to publish them. They were the successive daily impressions which a continued musing on the subject produced in my mind, registered as they occurred with the utmost frankness and fearlessness. If the reader shall suspect that he now and then perceives some inconsistency in them, a little candour and reflection will, I hope, induce him to alter his opinion. He must recollect that these are *Letters*, —not a formal *essay* or *dissertation*, where

an author is bound to digest the *whole* before he *commences* to write it.

As to any deprecation of censure and criticism, or any anxiety about it, he who has had intercourse with the literary world for more than forty years must know too much of its private history, its passions, prejudices, and intrigues, to concern himself with any thing of such utter inutility. He who cannot endure heartless and fitful criticism, or is not prepared even for foul and perverted criticism, must not write. All *first* reception is at best a chance: what is just and solid will some day find its due place in the public mind; what is not so will receive little benefit from temporary favour: — it is much more mortifying to be lifted up, and then to sink again, than never to have risen. What good

did the fame of *Darwin* or of *Hayley* do either of them?

Some will censure my warmth: if they cannot prove it *affected*, they are welcome to all which they can make of the objection.

Geneva, July 14. 1824.

LETTERS.

LETTER I.

Saturday, May 22. 1824.

YESTERDAY the papers brought me the news of LORD BYRON's death, on Monday April 19th, at Missolonghi in Greece, of a ten days' inflammatory fever. He was born in January 1788, and was, therefore, aged thirty-six years, and three months, wanting a few days.

On the first emotion of such intelligence it is too early to discuss calmly his genius, his merits or demerits.

It will be always difficult to separate one from the other, because they are almost always found together. His splendours and his extravagances; his beauties

and his offences against morality and taste, too commonly occur in the same work, and even frequently in the same page.

There is, indeed, a great difference between the fault which arises from ideas *unchastised*, and ideas *exaggerated*. The former comes from excess of force; the latter, from weakness which endeavours to supply the place of strength by unnatural and artificial efforts: Lord Byron's fault is of the former kind; never of the latter.

It seems as if he always disdained to *chastise* his first impressions; and yielded to all their unpoised violence. He saw things therefore in detached lights: and though his impressions were those of a faithful as well as brilliant mirror, which reflected objects under one single aspect; like a landscape under a burning and unshaded sun; yet he never seems to have received those mingled and graduated

views, where gilded clouds soften, and a thousand counteracting tints correct excesses, and turn glare into mellowed beauty.

Either his faculty of *reason* was very much inferior to his fancy and his imagination, or he little exercised it. He seemed always resolved to take things in the shape and colour in which his momentary passion would have them appear, and relied on the force of his fancy to make them appear so to others. He placed his spectators, like a magician, in the sole point of view where what he presented to them appeared just as he would have it; but as he, when his humour altered, could change the position both of himself and the object, he was often likely to laugh at those whom he had misled by his partial exhibitions.

I think that this will account for the instability of opinion, which he so often discovered. He was not considerate;

he would not give himself time to be profound, and comprehensive. He could not see good working out of evil; and how that, which on a narrow aspect of it, seemed severe, unreasonable, or foolish, would on a broader regard of all the circumstances be found beneficial and wise.

He was ingenious, acute, and vigorous, and therefore could enforce whatever impression he chose to take: but he had not that moral monitor within, which is independent of the intellect and the genius; and which is a guard against partial views; against the freaks of ability; and against the indulgence of the temptation,

"To make the worse appear the better cause."

He had a sort of self-confidence and arrogance, which made him feel as if he exulted to sport with the public mind; as if he had dominion over it, like an evil spirit; as if his powers by some irresistible

destiny were fated to defy control; as if he was ordained to ride in mockery on the necks of the people; to spurn public opinion; and to trample down morality, in order to show his strength!

He who was endowed with this almost superhuman audacity of spirit, combined with a rare splendour of intellectual gifts, was free to produce compositions, which would possess a striking character, such as more restrained pens had no chance of reaching. All regions of possible thought were open to him; and in the universal license of his mind, he could see views and gather flowers, which no other could visit, or collect. There was the chance of barrenness, of barbarism, of terror, of deformity, and disgust, in his excursions; but this mattered not to him: he laughed at the objections to what he produced of rude, or dry, or revolting; it was a part of his sport; a part of the trial of his power, to

which he was destined; and it set off the brilliant and magnificent parts more strongly by the contrast.

He had the powers of copious and rich fiction: but it wanted one essential part of the fiction which is requisite to the highest poetry — it was not cast in the mould of truth. All the characters of his creation partook of the defects of his own mental and moral composition. They are beings of violence; of extravagant and partial endowment; of scorn at moral ties; of splendid vice; of disdain of the state of existence in which they are moving; of mysterious claims to excellence above their destiny, which exempt them from the common restraints of life, and entitle them to do whatever eccentric and audacious things passion or caprice prompts, without loss of esteem or admiration, as if in revenge for their degradation among creatures of an inferior order.

These are mysteries into which genius

may throw the beings of its invention; and such fictions may open a thousand opportunities for splendid imagery, glowing description, and striking sentiment; —but they are not mysteries out of which they can so easily get them again. Truth, —eternal truth,—is against them; and truth only will allow of developments, which may justify the temporary agitation of the passions, and the excitement of temporary wonder.

Lord Byron, accordingly, leaves almost all his fictions at last under the veil of the darkness in which they commenced, and with which they have been carried on. — *The Corsair*; — *Lara*; —*Manfred*, &c. how is our curiosity satisfied in these? To what end do they lead? What truth is exemplified by them?

An exercise of imagination without producing an *end*, is like "long pas- "sages" in a palace, or castle, "which "lead to nothing!"

So far as there is an undeveloped result, — so far as inferences rise from the qualities and conduct of the characters in the progress of these fictions, — it is contrary to what our sober reason and conscience can admit, — contrary to the necessary duties of morality, which bind society together, — and such only as in the momentary demands of our passions can please us, or be admitted by us; because we cannot admit that generosity is connected with selfish indulgences; kindness with ferocity; and affection with violence, rapine, revenge, and reckless audacity.

They who are inclined to defend such indulgences of the imagination as Lord Byron gave way to, will probably meet me here, and charge me with begging the question, even if they admit the position that TRUTH ought to be the result of the *fiction*. — They will contend, that the qualities, of which I deny the union, are,

in fact, often united; they will say that it is necessary to tear off the disguise of hypocrisy, and that we must look at human nature as it is; — that the vigour of virtue is often joined to great vices; — and that the boldness which dares to paint things as they are, however contrary to prejudices, deserves all the distinction it has obtained, for force of mind, as well as of heart.

Undoubtedly, if these counter-assumptions be just, there is an end of my objections. — But are they just? Is such mysterious conduct as is attributed to LARA consistent with a predominance of virtuous over vicious qualities?

Wickedness may be painted, but then it must be painted, not as an object of attraction, but as an object of avoidance. It must not be so painted in colours of unqualified darkness, that we feel no interest in it; but the consequence of its ill qualities or ill deeds must

be unhappiness; and we must be the more affected by that unhappiness by the mixture of some attractive qualities with those which we condemn.

Is it not dangerous to the morality of the popular mind, to represent crime in attractive hues, and temporarily triumphant, without following it by the antidote of misery, regret, and punishment?

LETTER II.

May 23.

THE fiercer passions seem to have prevailed exclusively over the mind of LORD BYRON. Tender affection, timidity, sorrow, sympathy, appear to have had little influence over him; a love of power and of the unlimited exercise of his caprice, and anger and violent resentment at whatever thwarted his purposes, were his habitual temperament. It did not seem, that any hold could be made upon his conscience, or the nicety of his regard to the interests or happiness of others. He was one who lived according to his own humours, and whose will was his law.

In one sense he could not be properly said to have any enthusiasm, because enthusiasm is uniform, sincere, and cannot

change; whereas in his fits of highest fervour he could change at once to raillery, sarcasm, and jest; he could ridicule what he himself had the moment before admired most, and could turn round upon those who agreed with him, by taking the direct contrary side.

When he was pleased, he could be generous and kind; but no one was certain of being able to please him, or to continue to please him. He took offence without cause; and revenged, without bounds, trifling or imagined injuries. Goodness gave him no pleasure, as goodness; but only so far as it happened to suit some transient humour.

This disposition of mind and temper aided the *force* and *direct* vigour of whatever he wrote or said. He compromised nothing; he took every object in the single unbroken light of the moment; he had no qualms, no reserves, but drove onward to his point with a reckless

energy. He had risen above the breath not only of *vulgar* opinion, but of *all* public opinion. He found himself, or thought himself, above the reach of any assault which should endanger his fame; and, therefore, that, in the chances which he was free to run, all that was good would elevate him, nothing which was bad could depress him; — a state of extraordinary advantage for the due expansion of powers magnificent in degree, as well as rare in kind.

But still it was a dangerous and too tempting license: it encouraged him to let out all the dregs, as well as all the splendours of his great genius; he, therefore, let out many things trite, many coarse, some foolish, and some execrable; he put no guard upon the bitterness of a temper sometimes foul, and sometimes ungenerous; and it will be well, if this vast mass of objectionable matter does not finally hang heavy on his fame.

It must not be understood that by these objections to the poems or the genius of Lord Byron any idea is meant to be conveyed, that it ought in any respect to be brought down to the level of minor authors, or compared with those faint fabricators of artificial poetry, who, though they may sometimes acquire an ephemeral celebrity, yet are in truth gifted with nothing worth regard, and have produced nothing worthy of the labour of criticism.

Lord Byron always communicated images, or sentiments, or thoughts; he never dealt in mere empty language,— in the poetry of words and style. He conveyed some unaffected, undisguised, unqualified, and, for the most part, some unlaboured conception. He dashed out, with bold and able strokes, the impressions which had dominion over his mind. They were often impressions which others would contend to be partial, diseased,

over-deep, and discoloured, and not sufficiently softened by reflection; but still they were impressions received and communicated with splendour, fidelity, and skill. There is a magic in impressions powerfully represented, even though they are themselves not such as we approve. We delight to see the secrets which lie in the penetration of the mind and heart broadly developed to our gaze. We often suspect that there are private movements in the recesses of the bosom, contradictory to what is spoken, which too many feel, though scarcely any one is bold enough to avow. There is something of the pleasure and surprise of discovery in seeing these hidden impressions brought from their lurking holes out into day. There is a frankness in the confession, which wins by the charm of generosity.

There are, however, many tendencies to give to this sort of merit a little more

weight than it deserves. In admiring the confession, we ought not, therefore, to admire the thing confessed; but this we are often inclined to do. Hypocrisy is bad, but open error or vice of opinion is not therefore good. Not all who have been famed for virtue have been virtuous; but it does not follow, that all who have been pursued by scorn, or indignation, or obloquy, have been meritorious. To strain the eye to behold with an excess of severity, whatever has been sanctioned by time, and concurrent opinion, and with an excess of candour, whatever has been damned by it, is an inconsistent alternation of contrary extremes.

The general love of novelty, the impulse that is given by the attempt to change the current of popular judgment, will always render such an attempt acceptable, if executed with talent. It will possess a temporary attraction for its native strength and justness. Even when

it is erroneous, still, it may be the means of discovering truth, by the broad and distinct light in which it thus shows itself.

So far, then, wrong impressions of the fancy, wrong combinations of the imagination, wrong sentiments of the heart, and wrong conclusions of the head, may produce good by a bold, able, and striking picture of them. But this is a sort of praise, with which the poet and his admirers would be in no degree content. They would say, "We scorn the praise "of having afforded a warning; and not "a model!"

Others would say, "We do not enter "into the question whether what is re- "presented does or does not exist in "nature, or what are its moral effects; "whether it is desirable that it should "exist; whether its existence does or "would produce good or evil: our "business is with the picture as a pic-

" ture. Is it or is it not forcibly de-
" signed, drawn, coloured, and executed ?
" If it is, the question is decided ; the
" poet's power and merit is established ;
" and we need go no farther !"

But to argue thus, is surely to build on a narrow theory. It puts aside the quality, the character, the dignity, and rank of the design, and supposes all to lie in the execution. It is admitted that many essentials of poetical power would be thus exhibited ; but not all, nor even the most essential of all, —that of *truth* or *verisimility*, in magnificence, pathos, or beauty.

LETTER III.

May 24.

Lord Byron, however, was a very extraordinary man, not only in his own country and age; but, compared with any country and age, the brilliancy of his fancy and the power of his imagination have not been surpassed; and the active use of them was almost as wonderful as the gift itself. For twelve years, — from the age of twenty-four to his death at the age of thirty-six, — he never let them sleep; and he exerted them with this unexampled vigour in a course of life which seemed in some respects a great impediment to them. He was a wanderer; he gave himself up to sensual pleasures; and he delighted in personal dangers and the fatigues of the body.

On the other hand, it must be admitted, that in some other regards his eccentric habits were extremely favourable to the nutriment and display of those daring faculties which he so pre-eminently possessed. His solitude; his defiance of the petty formalities of the world; his frequent abstinence from those ordinary indulgences of the table, which cloud and enfeeble the mind, while they inflame the body, — all tended to aid and invigorate the energies of his intellect: while his enterprises, his change of scenery, his observation of new manners, his search after striking incidents, and his intercourse with what abounded both with energy and novelty, continually supplied new mental stores; kept all his talents fresh and in constant activity; and gave force, life, and novelty to all his inventions.

He was endowed by nature with a feverish and burning intensity of intellect and genius; a restless vigour which never

slept, and which consumed him at an early age. Had it not been fed and refreshed by variety, it probably could not have lasted so long. There is a point beyond which intensity defeats itself: it penetrates beyond the depth of life, and loses the charm of which it was in search. This would probably have been Lord Byron's case, had he not sought variety and adventure.

But it is curious to observe how that native intensity of faculties gradually developed itself. It shows itself little, if at all, in his earliest compositions: some of them show taste and poetical feeling —but not force;— he seems to have been fearful of unwrought ideas, and the attempt to touch upon new ground; he keeps near the shore, and uses the materials already worked into form, and polished. There can be no doubt that these were but a very inadequate picture of what was already passing in his mind;

but he had not yet strength enough to appear in his own poetical character.

Even in his *first two* cantos of *Childe Harold* there is much mixture of commonplace; and an ambition rather to catch and rival the tones of some of his predecessors, than the original and inspired strain of one who spoke directly from the muse herself;—and the charm consisted more in frankness of confession, and force of daring and undisguised feeling, than of eminent vigour and novelty of poetry.

There were, indeed, passages which showed a commencing disposition to express his own strong thoughts and feelings in his own fearless words: but they were scarcely more than preludes, and such as proved that practice and labour were still necessary to give him an adequate command over his own resources. Luckily for the expansion of intellect, the public received this production with

high favour. How much of this favour arose from a due appreciation of the merits of his poem, — and how much from the eccentric reputation of the author, and from the boldness with which he had repelled the unprovoked assaults of criticism, and the powerful bitterness with which he had turned back on the critics their own weapons, — matters not. It had at once the effect of setting free those rare powers, which have ever since been exerted in the production of public fruit, that has always astonished and often delighted the world. Encouragement will not confer powers which did not previously exist; but encouragement will bring them forth. It seems clear that Lord Byron himself had no strong consciousness of them, till the warmth of the sun put them into due motion.

They were powers which did not lie upon the surface. They sprang from gloomy musings; from watchfulness of

his own fierce passions; from a habit of looking, not only without pain, but with a dark delight, on objects of terror; of contemplating with an unaccountable sort of scornful triumph the strange inconsistencies of frail human nature,—its occasional mixture of horrible crimes, with the splendour of magnificent qualities,—and its seeming propensity to evil, as if born to be unhappy, and to incur punishment for that which it could not avoid,—and in exercising the severity of a sarcastic and relentless talent for tearing the disguise from hypocrisy,—and of an unsparing acuteness in piercing the robes of power, and detecting oppression and selfishness where the world had given credit for beneficence and public virtue.

To this task, and these mental occupations, both his talents and his temper were qualified to a degree beyond those of other men. The violence of his feelings was of a very peculiar cast; he had few

of the ordinary sympathies of mankind; —his sympathy was with contradictions eccentricities, impetuosities, wonders, terrors, violences, hatreds, resentments, scorns, indignations; —to play upon the brinks of precipices; — to snatch at forbidden fruit, while death stood to guard it; —and enjoy pleasure in the midst of storm and tumult. This appetite for the joys which arise from strong excitement, this love of extreme contrasts, this passion to battle with the tempest, to live in agitated waters, ruled over his intellectual, as strongly as over his material, nature. But such a state and such results were not to be produced by slight and gentle efforts. It required a constant mental travel out of beaten tracks; an eye perpetually in search of all peculiar appearances; a steadiness of sight in regarding objects from which others would shrink; and a fearless notice of

circumstances which others would not trust themselves to mention.

It is not strange, therefore, that these characteristics of his genius did not break out in the compositions which he first gave to the public. It is not in the nature of such fruits to be matured without much culture, and a strong sun. They cannot for the first time be embodied without long and familiar intercourse with them: they are too flitting and evanescent to be easily pictured;—not a glimpse of them can be traced by a common eye. The paths to them are intricate, mysterious, and forbidding: they are like a forest of terrible enchantment, enveloped in black clouds, which none but a daring spirit, of dazzling brightness, dares to enter.

The world would have lost whatever delight it has received from Lord Byron, but for an accidental coincidence of circumstances that encouraged his rare faculties into the path in which they were

most fitted to shine. Whatever be the amount or the benefit of that delight, it is not likely that one will soon arise again, capable of producing the same, or similar. The most powerful invention cannot by mere simple, uninstructed, undisciplined, unlaboured, exertion effect it.

LETTER IV.

May 25.

Some minds are cast in so sombre a mould, that they seem naturally disposed to delight in gloom, mysteries, and terrors. There is something in human existence which dissatisfies them, and produces a discontent and ill humour that drive them to seek familiarity with painful emotions. They love "to enforce the "awful, darken the gloomy, and aggra- "vate the dreadful." No one, I think, will deny that this was the bent and ruling genius of Lord Byron.

Our nature is in some respects inscrutable, wonderful, and strange: we are often seized with an irresistible impulse to gaze curiously and intently on that which fills us with horror while we gaze. There are impressions sometimes made

on a sensitive intellect or heart in early life, before reason has gained dominion, which nothing afterwards can efface. We know not what accidental circumstance may have given an impression of horror or bitterness to Lord Byron in his infancy.

LETTER V.

May 26.

It seems natural to the mind to love mysterious agitation. The tales of the nursery are principally characterised by the purpose of working upon ignorant and superstitious fear. Lord Byron's active mind, fond of strong emotion, probably always delighted itself with this violent food. Irascible, gloomy, perverse, proud, it nursed, perhaps, the seeds of discontent from infancy. The belief in evil spirits, whose dominion could not be resisted, may have been a strange sort of balm which reconciled him to himself. His family were under a cloud: his great-uncle, who possessed the peerage, had been thrown into sad and misanthropic seclusion by the unfortunate result of the duel with Mr. *Cha-*

worth; and a great declension of fortune darkened the veil which hung over the waning splendours of his ancient and eminent house. His father's *first* marriage, at least, had been unhappy; and his temper was said to have been harsh and despotic.

When Lord Byron entered a great public school, somewhat late and backward in the attainments pursued at these exclusively-classical institutions, with a person marked out by one of those defects which boys treat so mercilessly in each other, and with the reputation of a fortune very far below his rank, his proud and supercilious spirit received a shock, which seems to have operated on the colour of the rest of his life. He was ambitious, ardent for distinction, and vain. Obstructed and oppressed in the regular course, his energies, prompted by a daring and bitter temper, broke out into the most eccentric pursuits and

amusements. He grew defiant, misanthropic, and careless of moral character. He felt within him the stirrings of a genius, of which he perceived that others had not only no suspicion, but of which they even scoffed at the pretension. In the midst of this discouragement, in the midst of the rude and coarse habits in which it encouraged a temper naturally fierce, he still had returns of that higher ambition, of those more refined and more noble occupations, of which his mighty gifts of intellect had in the happier moments of his boyhood given him glimpses.

He wrote a variety of small poems, which he collected into a volume, and printed under the title of *Hours of Idleness.* Though these productions were unequal, a discerning eye could see in them passages which could not have sprung but from a true poetical feeling, and which could not have been brought

forth but by a considerable command of language and power of execution. But perhaps it will at first seem a little singular, that this volume was marked by no hint of any one of the striking traits of the author's character. It approached to elegance, and sometimes betrayed a tender melancholy; but it was not remarkable for vigour and daring originality.

It is a proof that the author did not yet know his own strength; or, perhaps, had not yet *felt* the commencement of it. But still conscious to himself that the domains of the Muse were his proper province, he paid his offerings to her, though with timidity, and in the forms which common usage had prescribed.

We may imagine him now soothing himself with the hope that a new æra was dawning upon him; that they who had looked upon him as one formed of gross, hard, and savage materials; as one

aspiring to vulgar distinctions by ferocious eccentricities; as one "fit for treasons, stratagems, and wars;" as one not of melting mood, who was insensible to the elevated refinements of literature; would now see with surprise their illiberal and unjust misconception of his character and endowments, and receive them perhaps with the more favour from the contrast to the outward appearances he had lately exhibited.

But he was first disappointed, and then outraged. His volume for some time attracted no notice. In truth, there must be something very fortunate, or very singular, in the first work of a young poet, which shall in *these* days engage the public attention. Verses from a young nobleman had nothing in the announcement to awaken curiosity; and Lord Byron had not yet raised in the world any rumour of genius to counter-

act the general indifference to such announcements.

The periodical critics were looking out for prey to pounce upon: Lord Byron's volume seemed such a subject as would answer the purpose. They had probably never heard any thing about the author; and there was nothing in the volume which promised the retaliation that followed.

The severity of the criticism touched Lord Byron in the point where his original strength lay: it wounded his pride, and roused his bitter indignation. He published his *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, and bowed down those who had hitherto held a despotic victory over the public mind. There was, after all, more in the boldness of the enterprise, in the fearlessness of the attack, than in its intrinsic force. But the moral effect of the gallantry of the assault, and of the

justice of the cause, made it victorious and triumphant.

This was one of those lucky developments which cannot often occur; and which fixed Lord Byron's fame. From that day he enjoyed the public notice as a writer of undoubted talent, and energy both of intellect and temper. He had yet to show himself as a poet in any high department.

Though Lord Byron might now be considered to be successful, his success was not sufficient to soothe his wounded pride. His manners were not calculated to conciliate love or esteem in general society. He was scornful, reserved, sullen, and unbending: suspicious of neglect, resentful for fancied insult, jealous that the inequality of his fortune to his rank would subject him to disrespect; of fiery ambition, yet of a disdainful contempt of the means of gratifying it; indulgent to his passions whithersoever

they led him; abhorrent of hypocrisy, and disregardful of decorum.

In the course of life which all these qualities and propensities fostered, he made numerous enemies and few friends. They who admired him feared him; they who thought candidly of him, had not yet courage to speak well of him; they who envied him, libelled him; and they whom he had repulsed with surly haughtiness or disdain affected to have shunned him.

He therefore sought recreation and escape from this sort of life by foreign travel. He went to Spain and Portugal, and thence into Greece. Here he wrote his *first two* cantos of CHILDE HAROLD'S PILGRIMAGE. "The scenes attempted "to be sketched are in Spain, Portugal, "Epirus, Acarnania, and Greece. The "whole, except a few concluding stanzas, "was written in the Levant."

Whatever favour these two cantos re-

ceived, — a favour probably springing from the impression Lord Byron had now made on the public, — I think that a calm examination of their intrinsic merit will not support. Lord Byron either had not yet found out his strength, or he had not yet sufficient practice and technical skill to bring it forth. It is true, however, that he wrote, not from memory, but from observation.

LETTER VI.

May 27.

The Giaour was published about 1813, after the *first two* cantos of *Childe Harold*. In this poem Lord Byron began to show his powers; he had now received encouragement which set free his daring hands, and gave his strokes their natural force. Here then we first find passages of a tone peculiar to Lord Byron; but still this appearance was not uniform: he often returned to his trammels, and reminds us of the manner of some favourite predecessor; among these, I think, we sometimes catch the notes of Sir Walter Scott. But the internal tempest; the deep passion, sometimes buried, and sometimes blazing from some accidental touch; the intensity of agonising reflection, which will always distinguish Lord Byron

from other writers ; now began to display themselves.

In the next poem, *The Corsair*, he first felt himself at full liberty ; and then all at once he shows the unbroken stream of his native eloquence, of rapid narrative, of vigorous and intense, yet unforced, imagery, sentiment, and thought ; of extraordinary elasticity, transparency, purity, ease, and harmony of language ; of an arrangement of words never trite, yet always simple and flowing ; — in such a perfect expression of ideas always impressive, generally pointed, frequently passionate, and often new, that it is perspicuity itself, with not a superfluous word, and not a word out of its natural place.

It is strange how he who was so young, who had led a life of adventure more than of study, nay, who had often seemed a good deal encumbered in his phraseology, could all at once arrive at this

excellence. It must have been the exaltation of spirit caused by temporary and unexpected favour, which by removing the gloom from his heart imparted extraordinary vigour to his intellect.

I am not aware that he ever again exhibited the exact kind or degree of elasticity which distinguishes *The Corsair*.

Lara is commonly considered as the *second part* of *The Corsair*. — *Lara* has some charms which the *Corsair* has not; it is more *domestic;* it calls forth more sympathies with polished society; it is more intellectual, but much less passionate, less vigorous, and less brilliant; it is sometimes even languid, at any rate, it is more diffuse.

The year 1814 was the great year of Lord Byron's triumph. Domestic disagreements, which came in with 1815, reembittered all.

In the spring of 1816, he quitted Eng-

land, never to return. Then came *Manfred*, — *The Prisoners of Chillon*, — *The Lament of Tasso*, — the *third* canto of *Childe Harold*. All these betrayed his increasing gloom and discontent.

In *Manfred* there is most invention: it is full of poetry: the imagery, the language, the dark, mysterious, yet burning, thoughts, are all poetical. It is the inspiration of the muse herself, which, giving full dominion to the imaginings that it causes, seeks only for words adequate to breathe out its fulness. It is above art: it has nothing to which the tests of art can be applied.

The Lament of Tasso is written with exquisite pathos, and force of sentiment both intellectual and moral. It has no false eloquence, no false splendour, no over-wrought efforts at panegyric, no attempt to dress up genius with affected power or common-place glare of miracles. It displays great knowledge of the human

heart, great rectitude of understanding, and a great sensibility to one of the deepest afflictions to which humanity is subject. The style is pure, nervous, tender, plaintive, and profoundly touching. The whole has a solidity and justness which will secure it attraction as long as our language lasts.

In the *third canto* of *Childe Harold* there is much more inequality. Whether it arises from the complex form of the stanza, or whatever be the cause, the style is much more encumbered; and even the thoughts and images are sometimes laboured. But still they are a very great *improvement* upon the *first two* cantos. Lord Byron here speaks in his own language and character, not in the tone of others;—he is *describing*, *not inventing*, therefore he has not, and cannot have, the freedom with which *fiction* is composed. Sometimes he has a conciseness which is very powerful,

but almost abrupt. From trusting himself alone, and working out his own deep-buried thoughts, he now, perhaps, fell into a habit of labouring, even where there was no occasion to labour. In the first sixteen stanzas, there is yet a mighty, but groaning, burst of dark and most appalling strength. It was unquestionably the unexaggerated picture of a most tempestuous, and sombre, but magnificent soul.

Stanza XXIII., regarding the Duke of Brunswick, is very grand, even from its total unadornment. It is, with the two or three stanzas which follow, only a versification of the common narratives; but here may well be applied a position of Johnson, that "where truth is sufficient "to fill the mind, fiction is worse than "useless."

There is, I think, very little flow in this canto: — it brings forth strength, and it draws from the fountain, but

it does not come without a struggle: — it has far more of depth than *The Corsair*, but not so much of inspiration. The words (as Johnson says of some one) are *forced* into their places; there is none of that felicity of expression, which seems beyond the reach of art. Lord Byron no longer seeks aid from others; but what he seeks from himself comes slowly, though it comes at last. He does not lose his self-confidence; he does not grow weary and languid; — but his spirit is here profound, rather than airy and elastic.

From stanza LXIX. to stanza LXXV. are some fine developments of his own spirit, and peculiar conformation of mind and heart; and here he arrives at *the Lake of Geneva.*

LETTER VII.

May 28.

Since I have written thus far, I have recurred to the criticisms on *Childe Harold*, cantos 1. and 2., — *The Corsair*, — *The Bride of Abydos*, in the *Edinburgh Review*. I do not find much essential difference of opinion from that which I have given in the preceding letters. The critics set out with observing that the taste of the age requires poetry calculated to excite strong emotion; and they endeavour, by a long philosophic speculation, to account for it in a manner a little, perhaps, too subtle and far fetched. It is more probable that it arose out of that general commotion and subversion of opinions caused by the French Revolution.

The critics go on to declare that in *Childe Harold* Lord Byron discovers

powers likely to gratify this new taste of the public, and, therefore, likely to make him very popular. Here their anticipation has been proved true by the event.

They then say that he discovers in these two cantos a good deal of *original vigour;* and yet they say that he often imitates *Scott* and *Crabbe;* of whom, however, they state the poems of the former to be but a cento from the works of his predecessors, assigning to him, at the same time, the praise of *original genius.* All this is possible; but it requires a much more nice and distinct development than the pages which contain these assertions afford. The nature of *originality* seems, in the generality of critical works, very imperfectly understood, and still more imperfectly explained. I must not say more of it here, because it requires the space of a separate dissertation.

The critics object to many particular passages as deformed by harshness,

inequality, abruptness, and bad taste; but, above all, they object, in bitter terms, to the gloomy and unamiable character of the hero, — *Childe Harold ;* — while, with an irony a little too palpable, they affect to give credit to Lord Byron's assurance that that character was not intended for his own.

They speak with moral indignation of the hardy vanity, which, having encouraged such morose and gloomy discontent, can expose it to the world as a subject of boast.

They admit, in this poem, merits of a kind which it surely had not yet exhibited; but still there is a lurking shade of equivocal and extorted, rather than willing, praise.

The Giaour followed quick; and here the critics are more direct. There were passages in this poem which put Lord Byron's powers, both in point of originality and force, beyond question; and they

seem now to have had no lingering doubt that Lord Byron was a real genius; and from this moment were perhaps inclined to give him credit for even more than he had yet displayed; but their taste was too acute not to perceive his inequalities and his faults; nor could it be expected, that when they saw them so distinctly, they should forbear to point them out. They did do so; but with sufficient candour and justice; and their criticism on this poem is altogether fair, precise, and able.

When they came to *The Corsair*, they commenced by speaking of the author as of one whose great genius was now admitted by all, and put beyond question. And they felt, (as all judges must, I presume feel,) that the poem then before them, was one, which not only confirmed but much increased the proofs of his extraordinary gifts of genius.

They praise in high terms the manner

in which he has managed the *couplet:* but when they assimilate it to the tone of *Dryden,* they do not seem to have a very nice ear.

They remark with force,—what is, indeed, sufficiently obvious,—the danger of always choosing for subjects of interest characters stained with crime and bloodshed, and of associating violence and ferocity with genius and splendid virtues.

They regret the sort of perversity, which always seems to dwell with particular delight on these strange and improbable mixtures.—If, indeed, though these odd combinations do not exist, they ought to exist, it would be well! but if they neither do exist, nor ought to exist, why create the picture of them?

In this article of the *Review,* though the praise is high, the criticism is not very discriminate. It is principally made up of *extracts.*

And now I will resume my own ex-

amination of the *third* canto of *Childe Harold.*

Lord Byron's character of *Rousseau* is drawn with great force, great power of discrimination, and great eloquence. I know not that he says any thing which has not been said before; but what he says issues apparently from the recesses of his own mind; it is a little laboured, which possibly may be caused by the form of the stanza into which it was necessary to throw it; but it cannot be doubted that the poet felt a sympathy for the enthusiastic tenderness of *Rousseau*'s genius, which he could not have recognised with such extreme fervour, except from a consciousness of having at least occasionally experienced similar emotions.

In this part of his poem he does not think of other writers, or of the art of poetry, but only of his subject; of expressing his own emotions, and of giving

a reflection of what is actually before him. Here are no technical splendours, the actual scenes are not made pegs to hang the stores of memory upon : all is precise, particular, and growing out of the occasion.

Lord Byron is sometimes a little obscure: he was now in solitude, occupying himself with intense thought, but perhaps this intense thought was new to him, and he could not yet entirely manage his materials. He sent his dark musings out, to penetrate into the nature of man, the course of human events, and the fate of nations. But gloomy, discontented, and disdainful, he saw for the most part only the unfavourable side. He was ambitious, and therefore the solitude which he loved did not give him unmixed pleasure. He was willing to persuade himself to hate that world for which he sometimes sighed, and anxious

to confirm himself in the belief that great minds were only fit to live alone.

The description of *The Storm* has a mixture of originality and grandeur, but it is a good deal laboured, and sometimes scarce intelligible; nay, it has some passages, which can scarcely be denied to be made up of false thoughts, thoughts which must have been painfully sought for, and yet were never clearly found; thoughts to which, after some attention, I cannot give any precise and satisfactory meaning. I can hardly therefore confer on this description the praise of positive genius: it shews research, and intensity, and strength, — but not perfected strength: it shews the incipient exercise of powers, which, after more maturity, (the result of proper discipline,) would be capable of all good.

The stanzas on *Clarens* (XCIX. to CXV.) are exquisite: they have every thing which makes a poetical picture of local and par-

ticular scenery perfect. They exhibit a miraculous brilliancy and force of *fancy*, but the very fidelity causes a little constraint and labour of language: sometimes there is a little too much compression and abruptness, and the words, almost throughout, want an easy flow. The poet seems to have been so engrossed by the attention to give vigour and fire to the imagery, that he both neglected and disdained to render himself more harmonious by diffuser words, which, while they might have improved the effect upon the ear, might have weakened the impression upon the mind. This mastery over new matter, this supply of powers equal not only to an untouched subject, but that subject one of peculiar and unequalled grandeur and beauty, was sufficient to occupy the strongest poetical faculties, young as the author was, without adding to it all the practical skill of the artist.

The stanzas on *Voltaire* and *Gibbon* are discriminative, sagacious, and just. They are among the proofs of that very great variety of talent, which this canto of Lord Byron exhibits. It is true, that taking this production by itself, we might hesitate to ascribe to Lord Byron that freedom, that native brilliancy, that copiousness and ease of rich fiction, which are essential to constitute a great poet. We should say that the author was a strong and intense thinker, that he had deep, but perhaps not quick feelings, that he was very laborious, and that he had the just and successful ambition of giving his own thoughts in his own words; but that his language was not easy, that he seemed to have no command over it till after great effort, and that even it often remained harsh and crude; that he wanted simplicity, and that transparency of ideas which show the perfect master; and that the admir-

ation we bestowed on him was often rather extorted than quick and voluntary.

But when we bring to our minds *The Corsair* and *Lara*, we acknowlege that these are defects which are not really inherent in the author's genius. In *them* we find the *reverse* of these defects; in them we find ease, harmony, rapidity, fire, a perfect command over language, and no obscure undeveloped thought.

The difference must have been the effect of a casual change of temperament of the author's mind; of an effort in a new department, of a struggle at a moment of tempestuous suffering, when the calm sought by solitude had not worked its effect; when the severe course of mental investigation which he had endeavoured to impose on himself was impeded, though not frustrated, by the uphewing which the past storm had still left behind it: when sadness, and regret, and anger, must have continually brought back on his mind impenetrable clouds.

The defects, therefore, of canto III., (if such they were,) contrasted with the powers which Lord Byron had already shown, did not operate disadvantageously for his reputation : they were at least the germs of such a new and unexpected kind of power, that, when joined to opposite powers so unequivocally proved, they added to the public wonder and admiration, and raised expectation of fruits not hitherto offered to the world.

In this state of fascination, the public is apt to take very faults as beauties; and Lord Byron became now supreme!

In a course of ages poetry is apt to fall into conventional phrases, and a sort of hackneyed veil of flowers. Almost all poets, at their commencement, partake, more or less, of this fault : — none free themselves, except gradually, from the thraldom, and the greater part never : scarce any one entirely, even at last. Lord Byron was now in progress to this great and rarely-attained end.

LETTER VIII.

May 29.

I HAVE, since my former letters, read the articles in the *Edinburgh Review*, on the *Prisoners of Chillon;* on *Manfred;* on the *third canto of Childe Harold;* on *Parisina;* on the *Siege of Corinth;* and part of that on the *fourth canto of Childe Harold.*

The best is what is said of *Manfred:* the praise is just, discriminative, and temperate:—it is not so, I think, in that regarding *Childe Harold*, which is commended, but not in the right places. The improvement on the first two cantos is noticed, but not with sufficient distinctness; and it is strange, that the critic passes unobserved the relapse into inversion, and harshness of language and

verse, after the specimen of inimitable ease and harmony given in *The Corsair*.

On *canto* IV. *of Childe Harold*, however strong an exhibition it may be of vigorous thought, intense reflection, splendid fancy, and fervid expression, the praises bestowed on its poetical merit are far too high. It contains a good deal too much exaggeration and violence, to be consistent with true taste; it often discovers the fury of its own contortions; it is frequently abrupt, harsh, and obscure; and the reader is fatigued and often pained at a tone of constant indignation, reprobation, and bitter anger, which represents the past as furnishing nothing but a series of unvaried oppression, injustice, cruelty, bloodshed, delusive expectations, unmerited fame, and false judgments.

If it be the business of the poet's imagination to picture out the world better than it is, how is it consistent with this rule to draw the world worse

than it is? The poet's purpose ought to be to awaken our nobler passions, our more generous sympathies, our emulation of virtue, our belief in the delights of true glory, our desire to incur toil, and vexation, and suffering, and danger, in the certainty of a final recompense from the justice of human admiration, and the felicity to be conferred in some higher order of existence. Is not the tenor of all the sentiments inculcated by Lord Byron in this canto the reverse of this? Does he not paint reputation always unjust; crime always successful; prosperity always the result of intrigue and violence?

Is this in the true spirit of poetry? Is it not oratorical rather than poetical? Is its purpose to represent general truths? Is it not rather to enforce narrow and detached points of view? But truth ought to be the essence of what the

muse dictates; and what is narrow and detached can never be truth!

There is, for the most part, amazing force in the light in which Lord Byron sees objects: but it is very commonly the force of a diseased and feverish mind. Sometimes we are caught by it, when we are in a state of excitation; but it is inconsistent with the state of a sober mind, and a calm and enduring pleasure.

Such blazes may, indeed, sometimes throw lights on dark spots, of which cold philosophy may take advantage: but, where they become an useful lamp to a few, they mislead thousands.

Intensity is made the subject of unqualified praise: but if the intensity be not exerted to discover truth, is it not an evil, rather than a good? Intensity in wrong is worse than feebleness. — Neither our imagination nor our fancy is given us to act uncontrouled by our reason. To encourage these uncontroul-

ed impressions is to bring back the human mind to a state of infancy.

And this very effect was, perhaps, that which it was the desire to bring back, at the crisis when the fashion of poetry of this sort became so alarmingly prevalent. — The French Revolution had endeavoured to inculcate that all artificial institutions had gone too far; had become corrupt; were worn out, and ought to be abolished: that a resort to first principles was necessary; and that society ought to be taken down, and rebuilt from the foundations. Conformable to this, poetry was required to return to babyism; and to represent all first and unmodified impressions. In the demand for simplicity, there was an immediate lapse into rudeness. All was to be energy and effect; and every subject was therefore chosen where the features were most prominent, and the thoughts, and

sentiments, and manners, least polished down.

The fashion of an age has a necessary tendency to draw forth those candidates for distinction, whose talents are best fitted to shine in the career most favoured. I think it was fortunate for that love of distinction, with which Lord Byron certainly burned, that the date of his birth agreed with the character of his genius. His temper, his heart, his mind, were all violent. He would not have excelled in what was calm: the intensity of his colours would have been too extravagant for sober and temperate reflection.

It is true, indeed, of Lord Byron, that though his are commonly first and unmodified impressions, they are the first and unmodified impressions of a most powerful mind; and of a heart of profound, though not always tender, sensibility. He is never, or scarcely ever, affected: he is

never touched by what is trifling, insipid, or unworthy of existing emotions: — taste and strong intellect, though often without temperate reason, mix themselves up in all his mental movements.

Lord Byron had a stern, direct, severe mind: a sarcastic, disdainful, gloomy temper: he had no light sympathy with heartless cheerfulness: — upon the surface was sourness, discontent, displeasure, ill-will: — beneath all this weight of clouds and darkness lay buried in the deepest recesses of his heart a fountain of enthusiastic tenderness and vehemently fond passion, which could only be touched in the abstraction of the most profound solitude by the wand of imagination, when his sharp and fiery temper was absolutely secure from the irritation of human intercourse.

Hence it would seem that he had two opposite natures contending in him; — the nature with which his imagination

would have clothed him; and the nature which his frail corporeal constitution imposed on him. The regret at these incompatibilities; the aggression which one nature was continually making on the other; perhaps produced those restlessnesses, those compunctious visitings, by which his life seemed to be harassed.

But, in answer to these speculations, it may be asked, "How the fruits of his "secluded imagination did not then con-"sist of ideal beauty, and sublime un-"contaminated virtue?"

Because it was seldom in his utmost seclusion that he could purify himself from the effects of the irritated temper which he carried thither! When he could so purify himself, then it was that the buried fountain began to flow, and to throw forth those waters of exquisite tenderness, which, though they sometimes, even then in their passage, catch some clouds from his opposing temper, yet, on

the whole, melt and enrapture the reader; and overcome and efface for a time the memory of the poet's great faults, and fierce and relentless passions.

So it is, that no faults will sink a poet, where there are grand, rare, and scarcely equalled beauties. When once the reader is unaffectedly and deeply touched, the reflection of his feelings is even apt to throw itself on the poet's faults themselves.

Those powers of Lord Byron, so extraordinarily possessed, and sometimes so happily exerted, seem to have had this effect on the public. His imagination, when he chose to put it forth, was magnificent and unlaboured: but, unluckily, he more often exercised his *fancy* than his *imagination;* and his fancy was too often encumbered, clouded, and embittered.

I think that this distinction will be found to be the clue, in many important

instances, both to the *faults* and to the *merits* of Lord Byron. When he spoke of actual experiences, he was gloomy, harsh, and bitter: when he saw only what his imagination presented, then it was *sometimes* full of exquisite beauty and deep tenderness; not *always:* sometimes, in his ill humours, his imagination submitted to the dominion of his temper; and on these unhappy occasions his inventions were marked by what appals, and even what disgusts: — then he delighted to sport, as it were, with human frailties; and even to reflect, with shameless glare, those degraded parts of our nature, on which his misanthropic eye seemed gratified to gaze intently.

It is probable that the extreme bitterness of his spirit was produced by early crosses, and early outrages on a morbid temper. Under other circumstances, under an earlier sunshine, it might have been corrected: it could never have been

entirely eradicated. He seems to have been radically intractable: he could not follow the ideas of other persons: what was therefore to be taught, he received with resistance. And yet he took with intense force and extraordinary retention of memory, whatever he chose to teach himself. All his compositions betray a most familiar acquaintance not only with the thoughts but with the very language of the English poets, both his predecessors and contemporaries. There are those who accuse him of systematic plagiarism: — this is not so: he produces no thoughts or feelings which are not his own; but his retentive memory recalls to him passages of others, when they agree with his own impressions; and then it is often impossible to avoid the recurrence to his own mind of similar language: — the prepared language rises with the thought; and, confident in the power of his own resources, he does not reject it, nor fatigue

himself to invent a laboured variation, merely to avoid the charge of being an imitator, and of want of originality, which he considers to be too baseless to be worth guarding against.

It is probable that he did nothing lightly; and that his attention in reading, as well as in composing, was intense. *Retentive* memory is undoubtedly the result of a laboured and continued attention: a *quick* memory is always as fugacious as it is quick.

LETTER IX.

May 30.

NEITHER the *Edinburgh* nor the *Quarterly Review* makes the due distinction between *fancy* and *imagination*; which yet is so very important, that every thing in poetry turns on it. Lord Byron, in many of his poems, seems not to have exercised much *imagination*, except so far as it was identified with himself. When *Shakspeare* imagined, he threw himself into the soul of *Macbeth*, or *Hamlet*, or *Othello*, or *Lear*. When Lord Byron imagined, he invested the imagined person with *his own* soul. It was thus when he imagined *Manfred* and *Lara*. If it was not so in *The Lament of Tasso*, the reason was, that *Tasso* was not an imagined person.

It is always chosen as a topic of great and perhaps exaggerated praise to Lord Byron, that he has the power of reflecting at once, with fidelity and brilliant force, pictures of images which actually exist. But it is forgot that this is not the highest purpose of poetry. It is the business of the most splendid degree of poetical imagination, to represent something more grand or more beautiful than actually exists. I will not say that Lord Byron never does this: but *this* is not the praise insisted on.

It is said by the *Edinburgh Review*, that, when Lord Byron's first two cantos of *Childe Harold* appeared, the public were prepared to demand what was forcible, striking, and direct: that they were tired of a polish, which had produced feebleness and faintness; and that they required prominent and distinct features, however rough, and even rude. Whatever, therefore, came fresh and full

from nature was received by them with applause and admiration. They were tired of what was trite; and they liked things the worse because they had been admired and approved by their predecessors.

They might have added, that *imagination* had not much favour in the public eye, when it was in this humour; — because it had been the habit of imagination to make things appear better than they were; whereas it was the present fashion to tear the disguise (or what was *called* disguise) from every thing. A strong, daring fancy, with powerful expression, seeing all things in a dark and unfavourable light from the reflection of a gloomy and discontented heart, keen at discovering wrong, and delighting to expose it, seemed to be made as if expressly to gratify the irritated and ferocious temper, under which the crisis was afflicting it-

self, and stirring itself up to changes and outrages.

The public, therefore, did not desire the grand and virtuous invention which should soothe the dissatisfied cravings of our nature, aspiring always at an higher and more perfect state of existence, by visions of ideal magnificence and exalted goodness. It was the grandeur of scorn, and indignation, and hatred, and bitter raillery, which it embraced with a phrensied applause: — the magnanimity (as they called it) which dared to give things their proper names, and to tear down with undazzled strength and unswerving courage the idols whom the world had hitherto set up to worship.

This temper and disposition was directly gratified by a genius which turned its piercing eye on reality, and, seizing on objects in a single point of view, drew forth the marked features, as they thus appeared, with intensity of force. Subtle-

ties, and evasions, and imaginative colourings, they affected to despise. The business of the day was to *strike home!* and this was their *cry!* They had to deal with a coarse and practical multitude; and poetry, with every other collateral aid, was to be made subservient to their purpose. What is *imaginative* is not so easily apprehended by the mob, even when it is in sympathy with the prevailing humour. Of what the eye has seen, and the ear has heard, the *dull fancy* can be awakened with the impression.

By accident, therefore, Lord Byron came forth at a period peculiarly fitted to obtain a favourable reception for the distinct cast of his genius. His faculties, however, were versatile, and, at another period, might have taken a different turn.

The tendency of these remarks is to show, not why Lord Byron indulged this turn, but why it was better received and more highly praised by the public than

invention. Neither the *Edinburgh Review* nor *Quarterly Review* pretend that there is invention in *Childe Harold.*

Of the *Giaour*, I think a large proportion is not only *not imagination*, but not the sort of *fancy* of which I have been speaking, — the fancy which strongly *reflects realities.* This is an assertion which the careless and superficial reader will not be at all inclined to admit or understand. I take this proportion so alluded to to be a sort of verbal brilliancy, partly produced by memory, and partly by labour and art. The pleasure it gives, beyond that afforded to the ear, is a sort of indistinct assemblage, which it calls up of twinkling lights, and half-defined images; so as to put the mind in a pleasurable ferment, as if it was looking at dim clouds touched and broken by occasional gleams of gold, which it can neither form into shapes of its own, nor let remain in unarranged masses according to its disposition and ability.

All of this kind, which is introduced by the great poet, is such as might have been done by genius very inferior to his; and one knows not how to account for the applause with which the public received it, except from the prejudice already raised in his favour, and confirmed, perhaps increased, by the really splendid passages which this poem here and there contains.

If once the public notice is drawn to a poet, the talents he exhibits on a nearer view, the weight his mind carries with it in his every-day intercourse, somehow or other, are reflected around on his compositions, and co-operate in giving a collateral force to their impression on the public. To this we must assign some part of the impression made by *The Giaour*. Lord Byron's personal character had every thing in it to create awe, and augment the idea of genius.

The *thirty-five* lines in *The Giaour*, beginning at line 67.,

" He who hath bent him o'er the dead,"

are so beautiful, so original, and so utterly beyond the reach of any one, whose poetical genius was not very decided, and very rich, that *they alone*, under the circumstances already explained, were sufficient to secure celebrity to this poem, and throw a delusive halo of delight over all the more common parts.

But if any part of the public yet hesitated, (and I believe many yet did,) the quick-following appearance of *The Corsair* dissipated all doubt. That poem was splendid, rapid, harmonious, easy, throughout, while it had the new and more essential merit of rich poetical *invention.*

When fashion, or party, or faction, has taken up a favourite, it of course embraces eagerly every new plea which may

justify its choice. If, therefore, *The Corsair*'s merit was distinct from that which had been chosen as the subject of applause, still it indirectly assisted to give weight to what the applauders were anxious to corroborate. They, therefore, who did not care for the *inventive merit*, in right of *itself*, liked it for this incidental advantage which it brought with it; and they who are pleased, are not always inquisitive to analyse the cause of their pleasure.

I think these remarks will account for the high poetical rank assigned to Lord Byron *before* he had shown his poetical *invention*, and for the praises still continued to be lavished on him, in right of the qualities which he *first* exhibited to the world; and *which* do not form the *legitimate* pretensions for putting him in the high class to which they assign him, and to which, if he is entitled, he is entitled on *other* grounds.

When praise is conferred on a poet who deserves it, but conferred on *wrong* grounds, it has the evil of giving a mischievous and deceitful colour to what is wrong. It is drawing away the public mind to encourage a false judgment of the nature of poetry, and, therefore, to nurture a different sort of flower and fruit; which, though they may have their charms, and their use, yet have such as are quite distinct from those of pure and essential poetry, and, therefore, tend to eclipse and crush the genuine. And this must be considered by profound thinkers, of high endowment, and strong sensibility, as no light grievance; because such persons know well that genuine poetry is the lamp of philosophy, and the animater of all the best energies of the human heart. Poetical invention is that which truth, when she takes it under her controul, chooses as her ve-

hicle, and employs as the lamp by which she shines in all her glory.

The confusions produced by the assignment of pre-eminence to the *substitute* must pervade all estimates of poetry: opposite pretensions must conflict; and in the doubts thus created, *both* must suffer.

It is desirable to place poets not only according to their class, but according to their degree of excellence in their class; and to determine in what cases greater excellence in an inferior class ought to take place of less excellence in a superior. Every separate essential quality has its subdivisions: — for instance, under *invention*, must be considered the *quality* of the invention, with regard to *verisimility*, grandeur, pathos, beauty, morality, instruction, novelty, &c.

Of thoughts equally just, one is more poetical than another in various ways;

as where it addresses the fancy, the imagination, and the heart, rather than the understanding. There is in Lord Byron too much vigour of observation and too deep a fund of sensibility ever to have recourse to factitious energy, or to give to incidents or scenery a false importance not belonging to them; and thus he always secures his reader's attention and interest; — for nothing fatigues the reader more, and lowers the admiration or esteem of the author more, or more extinguishes the spell of poetry, than what is turgid, over-wrought, and full of vapoury sound.

Lord Byron sometimes labours, but he labours because the idea is too great to manage: — not to enable him to *make* it great, but to *equal* its greatness. They, therefore, who cannot approve him, can never raise themselves to despise or under-rate him, or treat him with indif-

ference. They retire from him sometimes with horror, but never with cool contempt.

He used poetry as the vehicle of his thoughts: — minor poets only elicit or collect thoughts as the matter which they can use to show off their poetical *skill* or art. But the public was now tired of art: all that art could do *had been* done; they wanted solid food, — the ore, and not the workmanship. Travels in *prose* had always been a favourite reading, because they promised to gratify a common curiosity, and that love of novelty which is universal among the multitude. When aided by the ornament of poetical imagery and the force of numbers, and coming from one who had already shown his energy, originality, and mental power, and one also known for his adventurous spirit and habits of enterprize, it cannot be wondered that *Childe Harold* was

perused with avidity, and in a state of mind prepared to receive the most favourable and most animated impressions.

LETTER X.

May 31.

In the *fourth* canto of *Childe Harold*, a stupendous quantity of thinking and imagery is compressed; but it is, on the whole, too abrupt, too involved, too obscure, too laboured, too full of point and antithesis, to give that sort of pleasure which it is the purpose of pure poetry to give. The reader cannot understand it unless he brings to it a familiar knowlege of the history of *Rome* and *Italy*, — and even then it is not always intelligible, without the aid of the *notes*. It is the fruit of a mind which had stored itself with great care and toil, and had digested with profound reflection and intense vigour what it had learned: the sentiments are not such as lie on the surface, but could only be awakened by long

meditation. They are a little too monotonous, too angry, and too much darkened by uniform gloom. The lines very rarely flow: they have a sort of *painful* force: they often rather "extort praise" than "give pleasure." We cannot refuse admiration at the power of intellect which produced them, while we are fatigued and dispirited, both by the attention they require, and the pain and effort with which they seem to have been produced.

The stanzas interspersed, which describe the love of solitude, the pleasures of the mind, and the power of imaginative happiness, are numerous; but they form an almost identity with what the poet had said on these topics in his former cantos, and, beautiful as they are, I think, therefore, they are repeated almost too often. At the same time, there is in the topics and texture of the whole poem too little of a visionary na-

ture to produce that spell which poetry prides itself in exercising. It is the burst of a mind which has grappled with the world, and has the power to grapple well with it; which has known its wiles, and has had an eye fearless to look upon it; of which the dreams of ideal felicity have interposed no veil before the wrongs, the rudenesses, and the barbarities! One can see how this was fitted to the mind of the multitude; and one can see how, when the intermixture of higher merits gave a sort of adscititious charm to this, to which it was not separately entitled, the common mind was glad to catch at so strong an apparent sanction for that which gratified its taste, and to ascribe the interest to a kind of strength, which was not that on which the best and most refined judgments placed it.

The imagination may in the preceding ages have wandered too far from the earth, and have lost itself too much

among the clouds: it might be requisite to freshen it, and bring it back a little nearer *reality* in its primary materials, by reconducting it to its starting place; it might be well to recommence and regather the elemental materials from the ground. But critics, in praising the due execution of such a task, ought to have exactly distinguished the nature of its merit, and not have ascribed to what was particular and temporary, a sort of praise which belongs only to what is universal and permanent. Admitting those powers in Lord Byron, which produced this sort of effect, to have been very extraordinary, still they were such as did not partake of *invention;* nor of some other primary qualities of the highest poetry.

None but a being of robust and daring talent, of much reading, and intense reflection, could have written *Childe Harold:* but, bating a few stanzas, I think it might have been written by one

totally deficient in the first quality of poetry, —*invention*. I do not mean to insinuate that Lord Byron wanted that quality: he has shown it unequivocally and most distinctly in other poems. But the tendency of the extravagant and indiscriminate praises bestowed on *Childe Harold* is to induce the reader to believe that there are higher merits in poetry than those of *invention*, — and by confounding all tests, to make poetical merit an opinion of caprice.

LETTER XI.

June 1.

WHATEVER objections may be made to Lord Byron, none can be made which will take from him the title to fill an important place in our national poetry. There are in him more of the certain and positive qualities of a poet, than, with very few exceptions, are elsewhere to be found. Others clothe themselves, as it were, with the *external* mantle of poetry, which they can put on and off, and which do not form part of themselves. Poetry was part of Lord Byron's being; and he occupied himself in it as a vocation, not as an amusement. He took it as an intellectual art, which was applicable to whatever could engage the study of the passions or the reason of man: he considered its range, therefore, as unlimited

as that of *prose*, with the addition of many dominions peculiar to itself.

We may disapprove the subjects, the incidents, the moral of Lord Byron's *tales:* still they are poetical, — at least so far as they do not offend *verisimility ;* and they are so far original as to add to the stores of our intellectual wealth: they form part of the substance and genuine ore of that wealth.

The objections to them are, however, yet very strong: they most of them turn on some *revolting crime :* the *Giaour* turns on female infidelity; on punishment by death; and revenge by murder on the part of the seducer. *The Corsair* turns on piracy, fire, and devastation: murder committed by a female beauty on the chief who loved her; and an abandonment of her person, yet reeking with the blood she had shed, to the *Corsair*, whose liberation of her had excited her passion; and, lastly, the death of the Corsair's

faithful wife, and the disappearance of the husband in grief for the loss.

Lara describes one haunted by his conscience for some unknown crime: moody, fierce, vindictive; soon affronted; eager to resent insult; engaged in a duel with one who never afterwards appears, to whom he is suspected of foul play, and whose body there are signs of his having thrown into the river; then drawn into rebellion, and falling in battle, accompanied by a faithful page, who is discovered to be a female, and, by the manner in which she weeps over him, his probable mistress. This is commonly supposed to be the second part of *The Corsair*, who thus re-appears in the character of *Lara*.

Parisina is one who, though attached to a son, marries his father; then commits adultery with the son; and is with that son put to death under a public judgment made by the order of the father himself,

who is the sovereign of the country. Is not this a complication of frightful and revolting crimes?

The Bride of Abydos is the attachment and marriage of one who had been brought up as a brother with his supposed sister in disobedience of the marriage recommended to her by her father, against whom the supposed son, after this marriage, rebels, — and thus causes the most tragical deaths.

Of *The Siege of Corinth*, I forget the story. The crime for which *Manfred* afflicts himself seems to be incest with his own sister.

Here, however, are at least six stories which hinge upon disgusting wickedness. The *dramas* of *Marino Faliero* and the *Two Foscari* turn upon state-crimes. *Werner* approaches nearer the character of the six first poems: for, if I recollect, its foundation is a murder. *The Prisoners*

of Chillon is a picture of cruelly exercised power.

The Lament of Tasso is, perhaps, the only poem of Lord Byron's which is free from objection. It is pathetic, vigorous, poetical, pure, and in all respects beautiful.

Some wonder may be raised how, where the major part of these productions have some grand and radical defect, they can have taken altogether so strong a hold on the public admiration. It partly, perhaps, may be accounted for by the force and beauty with which the details are executed; by the strength, brilliancy, and correctness of imagery; by the power, directness, and sincerity of sentiment; by the life and genuineness of the imaginative conception; — so that, if the facts are conceded, all that results from them is drawn in the most brilliant colours of nature.

Poetical writers in general do no more than excite images and sentiments, as the basis of the *verbal* pictures they desire to create. Lord Byron's *verbal* pictures are quite subordinate to those which exist in *idea*, and merely their vehicle. In *them*, the *words* outrun the *idea:* in *him*, the idea outruns the *words*.

It is clear that there is a sort of shadowy, bastard poetry, which is a mere poetry of *language*. It is like artificial flowers; it has the same forms and colours as the real,—but *no life*. We read it, yet are not touched; but wonder why! Such writers have no fixed or unborrowed feelings or thoughts; no unborrowed inspirations: they have no energy of character; no peculiarities; nothing which distinguishes them from the mass of mankind; they therefore carry no weight with them: there is nothing in *themselves* which aids their writings.

Two of the most common faults,

among secondary poets, are to be *sickly* or *fantastic*. Feebleness is destructive to the charms of poetry, because it implies a want of inspiration. To be *fantastic* implies exaggerated effort, and want of native vigour. By long research, the imagination gets into bye-paths, and involves itself in intricacies, which the reader's mind does not easily follow. All addresses to the imagination, which do not strike at once, are faulty.

In Lord Byron's *earliest* poetry, his thoughts and sentiments showed occasionally a *character* of his own; but they were expressed in the conventional language of his predecessors: — in his *latter*, they were not only mainly his own, but expressed in his own *language*. His style was commonly excellent, because it was clear, vigorous, transparent, and unaffected; disdainful of the petty flowers of poetry, and all its petty artifices, its stale tricks and formularies, which are among

the most disgusting antidotes to pleasure that secondary poetry imposes on us.

It is probable that the generality of mankind are content to think without force or precision, and without much notice of their own feelings. If others present a mirror to them of what commonly passes in the human mind, and point out the forms, lines, and hues, they are pleased to gaze upon them, and acknowledge the likeness; but they could not have drawn it themselves,—nor are *they* the *only* ones who could not have drawn it. Even of *such* as aspire to *teach*, few think and feel with sufficient power to be able to produce a just and energetic picture. We cannot wonder, then, that when these powers are possessed in so strong a degree as Lord Byron possessed them, that they should have attracted all the notice and applause which they did attract. We may suppose for ourselves the facility of the recurrence of such powers; but their rarity is

sufficiently proved by a reference to what the test of experience shows us has hitherto been produced. Has such a combination of faculties been often exhibited in the past? If it has not, what right have we to suppose that it will soon recur again?

If a poet could be made by the accidental application of good abilities, then the place of him who dies may be supplied without difficulty; but a genuine poet is a being of a mould and endowments positively peculiar, and most rare,—one whom industry cannot make, and neglect cannot extinguish: a being, whose spells cannot be effaced by faults, and of whom the admiration cannot be overcome by eccentricities or perversities associated with his prodigal gifts of mind. A man of acquired powers, of wealth not inherited but procured by his own industry, is one made by himself; and, therefore, such as others may also make

themselves, if they will. Such an one is never above common rivalry; whereas if a rival arises to the other, it must be so rarely, that it need not be feared.

In selecting such an one as an object of distinction, and worthy the public regard, we cannot err. Nothing diminishes the value of fame more than the attempt to draw notice to insignificant persons, — because it tends to confound the eminent with the obscure, and to induce the belief that public notice is no test of merited superiority.

Nothing is more satisfactory than to find in those on whom the public voice has fallen, qualities to justify the celebrity conferred.

LETTER XII.

June 2.

WHEN we arrive at a certain age, we begin to doubt whether *fame* is of sufficient value to be worth any sacrifice. Lord Byron had not arrived at that age. But it does not follow that when we are convinced of the *emptiness* of fame, we are to abandon the pursuit by which we had hoped to have gained it. That pursuit may give *intrinsic* pleasures, which will recompense its labours. Such, I think, is poetry cultivated by him who has a true genius for it. The state of mind and habits of *invention*, observation, and reflection, which he nurses, all produce, occasionally, intense gratification to him. In his walks, in his solitary musings, in his midnight meditations,

they occupy, elevate, and thrill both his intellect and his heart

But if there were no good in these endowments, save the *fame* resulting from them, it would be a good to be enjoyed or withheld at the strange caprice of popular breath, nay, at the caprice of individual opinion or taste. On the other hand, if it be, as it is, something positive and inherent, then it is at no one's mercy. During an author's life, fame is often bestowed on him, or denied him, in right of something connected with his personal character, and extraneous to the merit of his writings. But this effect ceases with his own personal existence: his literary productions will, after his death, be estimated correctly: favour will not exalt them, censure or prejudice will not be able to sink or depreciate them; they will be judged impartially by their intrinsic qualities alone.

The effect, however, of the vast variety

of false pretensions, which fashion may set up for their day, is to have so confounded distinctions, and produced such uncertainty of taste and judgment, that the multitude have often been led to suppose that there is really nothing *fixed* in what constitutes the test of genius and merit of poetry. If there be nothing *fixed*, if it be really only matter of *opinion*, then *fame* is *all!* then appeal is useless, and hope of future justice, in return for present neglect, is a *shadow!* But if there be solid and unchangeable principles, — if there be precise and unequivocal requisites, if there be essentials without which true poetry cannot exist, and of which the exhibition constitutes the character of true poetry, — then what can prejudice and malignity do, finally to depress the estimation which the work will obtain?

Yet so it is, that in the change from one sort of false admiration to another, the

multitude at last conclude, that there is no admiration which is just and positive, and not liable to change.

Luckily for Lord Byron, he possessed so many strong essentials of high poetic genius, that, as not all his failings have hitherto suppressed his poetical reputation, so they never will. He had some faculties not likely to recur again, at least in the same brilliancy: but even if once in a century such an one should recur, can one rival in such a space diminish the attraction of Lord Byron's genius? The *intensity* of his fancy and feelings on particular subjects will never be rivalled; and as little will the native and beautiful force of his language on those occasions be approached. His eye for the scenery of nature, from which he "drank de-"light;" his rapturous and profound imaginings of female beauty; the dark creations of his gloomy spirit, when he indulged the bitterness of his discontent;

as all these were genuine, unforced emotions, unmingled with artifice, and undebased by exaggeration, stand beyond the reach of the assaults, the sappings, and the moulderings of time; no industry nor skill will reach them, nor any absence of faults make amends for the loss of them.

Genius itself scarcely ever feels so *intensely* as Lord Byron felt: very inferior minds often feel more correctly and purely. But absence of faults is not excellence. The triumph of nature over art was seldom more apparent than in Lord Byron. Successors may attempt to catch his merits, and avoid his errors; they may succeed in the *latter*, but their mimickry of the *former* will be ridiculous.

Lord Byron stands aloof: the fearless use of his powers has secured him unrivalled pre-eminence in his own walk: had he been checked, had he compromised, he would have appeared only like a common poet. It is in the very

things in which he was first opposed that his strength lies. Yet it would be difficult for another man to carry off the same daring indulgences: a meeker spirit, one of less eccentric habits, could not do it: they could not face the world, and bear up against the raillery of society. Even Lord Byron himself had to encounter contumely and ridicule.

With regard to the objections to him in respect to *morals*, and to want of *verisimility* in some of his stories, they do not affect the force of the poetical pictures in which he deals, taken in a detached point of view. In the point of sight which he has chosen, the images are correct as well as powerful. There is in this respect a truth and reality in Lord Byron which is, perhaps, his prime attraction. He is, in one sense, *all life;* or, to make use of a vulgar expression, "all "flesh and blood." He deals with human beings; and though he sometimes in-

dulges a wild and mysterious imagination, it is the imagination which in actual life associates itself with our material nature; which is really experienced by man, when he is gifted with particular qualities of mind, and cherishes particular habits, and is roused by particular passions and emotions.

Lord Byron, therefore, never uses false attractions; he never, in the attempt to please or strike the reader, resorts to sickly, artificial, or fantastic inventions; he is always manly, direct, and unaffected; his frankness, the apparent *thought* which is at the bottom of his words, makes the reader surrender himself up to his sincerity.

All secondary poetry is a sort of departure from life into a region of insipid fairy-land, in which the reader yields himself voluntarily to a pretended illusion that he knows to be only an artifice. It never carries him away; it never

overcomes his belief: it is a sort of baby pleasure, of which in his more sober moments he is ashamed.

Not so with Lord Byron: grave minds may condemn him, they cannot think him trifling; he has no community with baubles; he scorns all the pretty ornaments of minor poetry; he is stern, severe, plain, and sometimes rough; he only rises into ornament where the words become necessarily ornamental from the character of the ideas to be conveyed. He never, therefore, is guilty of the emptiness of a poetry of mere language. Lord Byron has added to the stock of poetical ideas and the force of poetical diction. He has imparted emotions, such as had not hitherto been experienced; his poetry therefore is such as no other in our language can altogether supply the place of.

This is a sort of praise to which very few indeed of our poets can lay claim.

In truth, the original poets, the poets not of language but of thought, are rare; and of those who have thought, the majority have not gone out of the common track, and have thought but faintly. He who thinks for himself, and thinks differently from others, is long before he can be *confident* of his *own* ideas: at first, he is apt to suspect that, in thinking differently, he thinks less perfectly than others, and he places his diffidence in what ought to be the ground of his pride. Even Lord Byron, bold as he was, seems at first to have laboured under this disadvantage.

Lord Byron drew from nature; but he may sometimes have made use of books, viz. of borrowed language to convey his own ideas. Probably, he could not easily reject the supplies of his memory, and he disdained to take the trouble to do so. His mind appears to have been scarcely ever stagnant: it was always at

work, and always in strong motion. He delighted in agitation : the ocean and the storm was his element. He liked nothing which was gentle and calm: it gave *ennui* to his restless and fiery spirit. He was, (to use an expression of Johnson,) " a lamp that spent its oil in blazing."

When nature has been prodigal to man in mental endowments, at least as much of his existence here passes in thought as in action. Lord Byron, therefore, in a life *brief*, in years lived *long*, by the estimate of the space over which he had gone ! He passed little time in idle company, and in the empty ceremonies of society.

Scarce an hour elapses, in which he who looks upon nature with a poetical eye may not find something to observe and to describe; some emotion with which to associate it; some reflection with which to enrich it; something not sought, but which involuntarily forces itself on sensi-

bility and intellect. If it be only such as the author takes at second hand from prescribed models; if he only moves after some leader, and persuades himself that he feels or observes, because he has learned a lesson which teaches him that some other has done so, then he may abuse or improve *himself;* but he adds no wealth to the stores of intellect impartible to others.

There is no reason to suppose that Lord Byron's feelings or ideas received dictation from any objects, except from those alleged by him to have given occasion to them. He described the appearances of nature, the outward storm, the internal tumults of the heart, all, directly from his own experiences and emotions: they have, therefore, a sort of certainty and truth; a freedom from all taint of artifice and affectation; which gives them the same value, when added to the poetical stock, as any pure spirit

or essence supplied to a diluted and corrupted liquid, which has been long separated from its source. All the ornaments which weaken, and which have been long used, with a total forgetfulness of the purposes to which they were orginally applied, are rejected as worse than surplusage, and the naked parts set off to double advantage those where ornament is really required and properly applied. They form a happy contrast to that uniform tawdriness, where glitter fatigues from its unvaried glare, where all is hollow, where there is splendour without heat, and swell without strength !

The knowlege of Lord Byron's character,—the knowlege that the impetuous and perturbed impressions to which he represents certain scenes and incidents to have given occasion, have really in *him* produced such effects, — confirms the confidence of the reader in his sincerity,

and pleases him by the coincidence of *fact*, with the *speculative* tests assigned by sound criticism.

Ordinary poets have nothing marked in their personal characters. They are tame in their feelings, and common in their habits and manners. All vehemence and enthusiasm are, when these authors employ themselves in composition, put on for the occasion: they make a mere parade of words; and, therefore, they are almost sure to wander perpetually into that with which genuine sensibility has no sympathy. It is an *ignis fatuus* which they follow: they embrace a cloud, and catch a shadow.

Whatever is not capable of being really felt under particular situations, and by particular characters, (it is not necessary that it should be *generally* felt, and by *common* characters,) is not true poetry. If it be whimsical, far-sought, over-refined, technical, ostentatious, or pretend-

ed, it cannot suit a simple and sound taste: it cannot please except those who *study* to be pleased, and delight in *false* excitement.

When a stern, morose, plain-minded man takes up Lord Byron's pages, he cannot deny that the author is in earnest; he says to himself, "If I am sarcastic and "censorious, he can be sarcastic too; my "ridicule will fall dead from the attack; "my bitterness will be repulsed! here "is no pretension; nothing which the "touch of the spear will explode. I "cannot but be awed, though I disap-"prove and hate!" He acknowledges that what is described has been felt, though he wonders how it can have been felt!

It will never happen, therefore, that Lord Byron's poems will be laid aside: they will be perused, and recurred to as developments of some of the strange secrets of the human character; as pic-

tures of the tumults of a mighty, but frail, spirit; as an admission to the inner shrine of a magnificent, but gloomy, poetical soul!

LETTER XIII.

June 3.

It may be remarked, that I have here dwelt on the merits of Lord Byron's *fancy*, rather than of his *imagination ;* — and that this is not the prime and most essential quality of a poet, if the doctrine I had previously laid down be correct. I answer, that in Lord Byron's case the merits assigned to his *fancy* belong also to his *imagination.* His combinations of imagination are made from the materials of a fancy furnished with original and strong impressions ; and the pictures which he presents as those of imagination are made up of such as his mind's eye has actually seen, and the emotions attributed to them such as his bosom has actually experienced from them. There is, therefore, a *truth* in

his imagination, which constitutes one of the grand essentials of perfect poetry.

He who has *fancy*, has not always *imagination:* but if he has *imagination*, it will almost necessarily follow the character of his *fancy*. And we are content with occasional exhibitions of mere *fancy* in *him*, whom we know capable at other times to put forth *imagination*.

The power of conveying a picture to others, though it be no *invention*, is a minor exercise of poetical power. The distinctness of impression necessary to give the faculty of reflecting it; the selection of circumstances; the command of adequate language; are all poetical qualities, and ingredients of poetical power. And he, who has these in a strong degree, almost always has imagination also. In *Childe Harold*, the faculty exercised is principally *fancy:* in *Manfred*, it is *imagination;* in the *Lament of Tasso*, it is a mixture; in *The Corsair*,

and almost all the *Tales*, it is decided *imagination ;* and in all these the characteristic is that earnestness and that force which shows that the author himself was under the full impression of what he has described, and literally possessed, or inspired, by the muse! This sincerity and earnestness are among the marks of genuine poetry ; and when it is considered whence they must necssarily result, they are so considered with good reason.

When the image is not actually before the author's mind ; when it is not distinct, not forcible, not of a poetical nature, it is impossible that the emotions described should be of a genuine or striking sort: they must be affected, fantastic, far-sought, and false. They may be conveyed in language which has the appearance of elegance and beauty, but which is merely superficial, and will not convey any clear ideas. The author's reliance will probably be placed on the

dress, on the charm of ornamented language; but if there should be any merit in this adventitious aid of illustration, it would rather weaken than forward the *main* purpose, because it would distract the attention from the emotions intended to be awakened, by engaging it in that which was only secondary, and thus fix the mind upon the chosen *means*, rather than upon the *end*.

So it, in fact, always is. Common poetry is almost always constructed in this cold and artificial way. The author measures its *merit* by the *pains* it has cost him; by the ingenuity he has exerted in finding *substitutes* for real emotion, and for the native and forcible eloquence which flows from it. He estimates by the quantity of *artifice* put forth; and this *tells* well, because *artifice* can always be *measured*.

Strong impressions, therefore, strong feelings to furnish the fancy, and give

glow to the imagination which supplies itself from such stores, and acts itself with similar force and sincerity, are the only sources from which true poetry can flow. No industry or skill can be a substitute for them; for *these* only produce a provoking sort of illegitimate composition, which disgusts in proportion to its pretensions.

It is vain to attempt to account for the possession of the genuine endowment by one man in so superior a degree to another. Many have strong impressions, and feel strongly, who yet cannot be poets: something is required beyond these; perhaps, in part, the early habit of watching thoughts and emotions; and the faculty of clearly observing, defining, and expressing them; all which must be greatly facilitated by the *duration*, as well as the force, of the impression. The duration is of course prolonged by the voluntary continuance of attention.

Many of these habits are probably contracted in our childhood, before our reason and our will have much influence; we must attribute them, therefore, at least in part, to a *predisposition*, or *propensity;* Dr. Johnson would say, *accident*, — but I cannot think so.

It seems strange, that if Lord Byron had an *impure* mind, he should so much delight in the scenery of nature. That he *did* intensely delight in it, all his poetry most unequivocally proves. The grandeur and beauty of nature are apt to reproach a foul conscience. The dictates of the heart are awakened in solitude; the sensibility becomes more keen; and the memory acts with greater vividness. There is no false applause; no flattery from the interested or the servile; no distracting noise of conversation, or of music; no petty occupation of ceremonies, or little social duties: the thoughts are left to take their natural, un-

broken sway; and truth appears unshadowed, and in her full splendour. Would then he, who had much to reproach himself with, choose the haunts of nature and solitude?

On the shores of *Aberdeenshire*, Lord Byron seems from infancy to have accusstomed himself to delight in the expanse, the roll, and the lonely roar of the Northern Ocean! Perhaps the gloom of a mortified pride early impressed its dark shadows on his sensitive mind; perhaps, he early found his aspiring and indignant spirit insulted and outraged in society, and sought solitude to give loose to the daring activity of his meditations; where his imagination could accommodate his actual circumstances to his desires, and his aggrieved temper might find peace and self-gratification!

The whole frame of his mind and body was irritable, and probably not (in the ordinary sense) of the *melting* mood.

He was fierce, — and roused rather than discouraged by opposition. It may be presumed, that in early childhood some terror, disappointment, or disgust, took deep and ineffacible hold of his sombre imagination. There are certain sorts of honour which enchain our faculties; which fix us on the spot; and make us continue to gaze on that which we most dread. There seems to have been a spell of this sort on the faculties of Lord Byron. It is possible, that what an irresistible impulse led him to describe sprung rather from horror than pleasure. It eased his mind to give vent to the image that haunted it, and he thus threw it off.

Some faculties can only be kept from stagnation, or perhaps from preying on themselves, by a resort to strong impulses. An habit of this kind is sometimes contracted; and then, by a species of fascination, he who has contracted it occupies

himself with ideal crimes of frightful magnitude, without being tainted with any of the foul stains which would attach to their reality.

This is a dangerous theory, and is liable to lead to great abuses, but it *has* sometimes happened, and I cannot but suspect that it is at least partly true of Lord Byron: he did not derive his blood from a moral father, and his impressions of morality were not very nice: the habits of his life; his alienation from society; his foreign residences; his impetuous passions; the inequality of his fortune to his rank; his domestic disappointments; his unkind reception by the world at his outset; his insulted pride; — all confirmed him in a temper of defiance, raillery, and satire, and seemed as if they had irritated him to the eccentric resolution of representing himself worse, rather than better, than he was; — as if he should exclaim, "Ye hypocrites! I make no pre-

" tence to the virtue which you accuse
" me of wanting. I will clothe myself
" in crimes far darker than those of which
" you accuse me, and yet hold my head
" in proud defiance above you, and
" laugh you to scorn !"

This supposition may be deemed a little too far-fetched, yet it is at least probable that some indistinct approach to it passed in Lord Byron's mind or heart. I am sometimes apt to think that the manner in which he takes delight to raise insinuations against himself, is a proof of his consciousness of unassailable innocence : where there is a sense of guilt, there is a jealousy of drawing public attention to it.

But, after all, we are bound to examine poetry by its *intrinsic* value, without reference to the character or conduct of its author. What is immoral in itself, cannot be defended; and whatever interests us in favour of characters stained with great

crimes must be immoral. *The Giaour*, *The Corsair*, *Lara*, the *hero* in the *Bride of Abydos*, &c., are all immoral, yet they are clothed with brilliant qualities which raise our involuntary admiration, and are therefore dangerous to the passions and native propensities of warm and daring spirits. In reality such an union of great qualities with violent crimes is seldom found, — and where it is found, it is commonly followed by contrition and unhappiness, which are not brought into view by Lord Byron, and therefore make the example more dangerous; besides, *rare* instances ought not to be selected, where they are in themselves objectionable.

It is true, that there is a sort of extraordinary attraction, which the multitude sometimes find in characters of this cast, but this attraction is a vicious one: it is because it flatters their evil passions, and gives a colour to the indulgences

they wish to pursue: there is a general hatred to *hypocrisy* among mankind, — and whatever goes to the *contrary* extreme, pleases as a contrast to it.

But it is to be lamented that the imaginative faculties of the poet should not be exercised in producing adequate excitement, by bodying forth the grandeur, the pathos, or the beauty of what is virtuous; for surely all these qualities are much more easily and naturally found in virtue than in crime: they may not excite quite so much surprise; but surprise is a bastard sort of excitement, and as transient as it is illegitimate.

There had, no doubt, been some early defect arising from want of discipline, or some other accidental cause, in the first associations of Lord Byron's mind. It may, therefore, be questioned, whether it could have been ever entirely eradicated; and I have not much confidence that we in general grow better, though we may

grow more plausible as we grow older: but Lord Byron's talents were extraordinarily various as well as powerful, — and no one can be very sure what he might not have done, had he lived.

It is not that Lord Byron's poems want *conscience;* it is the torment of conscience, which is one of the most striking and powerful subjects in which he deals; but the fault is the constant tendency of insinuation, that there is in man a bent to crime which he cannot resist, and that the Evil Spirits have a dominion over him, which at once make him conscious of the crime of submission, and yet impotent to escape it; — a supposition which would seem to throw on Providence the charge of having destined mankind to a hard and unjust fate.

If it be answered, that Lord Byron did not foresee this tendency, — that he merely indulged himself in characters and pictures which displayed the gloomy colours

and strong powers of his own mind in a manner likely to make striking impressions on his readers, not looking *beyond*, nor concerning himself with such remote consequences, — the reply is, that he was *bound* to look *beyond*, — that public criticism perpetually called his attention to it, — and that it betrayed a hardihood not very pardonable, still to go on in the same career.

I am at a loss what rejoinder to make to this reply: I would find one, if I could.

LETTER XIV.

June 4.

WE have to examine, *first*, what are the powers which Lord Byron actually *did* exhibit.

Secondly, To what place in the scale of poetical merit such powers, so admitted to have been exhibited by him, are entitled.

It cannot be denied that his fancy was susceptible of very strong impressions; and that his sensibility of emotion from them was violent, if not tender.

It cannot be denied that he had an *understanding* sufficiently acute, and a temper sufficiently curious, to observe and express in adequate language such impressions.

It is equally certain, that the impressions made on him were those of images and objects such as poetry delights in.

It is also certain that in such images, so expressed, he *does* deal.

Are these poetry, then? Or are they not? And, if they are not, *why* are they not?

Some may say, that they are described with more violence, and in stronger colours, than their archetypes justify. But are they described in stronger colours than those in which they were impressed on the poet's mind? If they are, they are exaggerated; and exaggeration is always a great fault.

But they are not so described. It is clear of Lord Byron that his words never outran his impressions. Is it not, then, sufficient that such was the degree of warmth in which the objects appeared to Lord Byron? Did this outrage probability or verisimility?

Still these powers, so exhibited, though entitled to a distinguished place in the poetical scale, are not entitled to the

highest, because they do not constitute *invention.*

We are glad to have the scenes which we *have* viewed, or *may* view, in nature itself, drawn by a poet's hand, and associated with a poet's feelings: he aids our eye to select; and he gives impulse to our hearts, and light to our understandings. But it is the business of the *highest* poetry to go *beyond* this: it is its vocation to body forth what the eye had not yet seen, nor the heart felt, nor the understanding conceived; but of which the mind has persuaded itself, that it has already had faint glimpses which it could not define. This is *invention* of the *highest* kind. There is, however, a poetical *invention* short of this,—where the imagination *creates* from the materials furnished by the stores of the fancy, distinguished from the identical scenes reflected by the fancy directly from nature. *This* degree of *invention* at least is necessary to constitute pure poetry.

Has then Lord Byron exhibited it?—It must be admitted that he has: not in *Childe Harold*, but in many of the poems which followed. But he has rather done it in character and in mental ornaments than in scenery.

Inferior poets have not one or the other: they have neither *invention* nor even truth of *fancy*. Their native impressions are not strong and distinct; and they endeavour to supply the imperfection, in the susceptibility of their fancy, by flowery, vague words, by great pretension, and a mysterious sort of fervour, which awakens a stir, but ends in vapour. If they attempt *invention*, it is still more extravagant: all attempt at *verisimility* is abandoned; and they even place their glory in setting it at defiance.

It was in the reverse of all this that the spell of Lord Byron's power consisted. His earnestness, his directness, his self-emotion, were so decisive, that they im-

parted themselves to the reader. He always understood himself, and, therefore, made the reader understand him.

When poetical powers are so rare; when native force of *fancy*, and still more, when native force of *imagination* are conferred on so few; can we wonder, that where they are decisively displayed, admiration follows them,—even if the application of them does not always lead to the best ends?

In Lord Byron the *possession* of these powers is demonstrative:—if he has defects, it is only in the *conduct* of them;—and this, perhaps, seldom appears in *detached* parts, but only in the examination of his poems as *a whole*,—which few will take the trouble, or have the capacity, to do.

In the utmost rigour of criticism, if we try his poetry by a demand of *all* that the very strict principles of poetry have made requisite, he will often be wanting,

because he will be wanting in *moral truth* and *wisdom;* and, no doubt, this is a main defect, which will always preclude him from occupying a seat in the *highest* class. But as every thing human is imperfect, so perhaps he may be entitled to a high place in the *second* class.

I say this hesitatingly, because his invention has not been extended to any *long heroic poem,* — and his *dramatic* invention is not great. It is true, that poetry must be tried by *quality* rather than *quantity;* but a certain degree of *space* is necessary to try invention, and give scope to its powers.

Lord Byron, in confining himself to that with which his disposition and habits had made him conversant, was always fresh, vigorous, and full of the breath of life. In all invention, conducted as a task, and under the guidance of a cold judgment, there is always something faint, dull, vague, and even uncer-

tain;—and the poetry ceases to be animated; it dies; it ceases to be poetry.

One laments, however, that powers so great as those of Lord Byron should not have been made still greater, by a little more of that management, which would not have been difficult.

Passion for solitude, passion for images of terror, passion for female beauty, seem to have been the grand features of his intellectual and poetical genius. In these he had a glow and a force peculiar to himself; and for these his poetry will probably be always read, as long as the language lasts. But it will yet always excite the wonder of a sagacious mind, accustomed to meditate on the human character, that such intense sensibility could be united with so much fierceness, and so much bitter and resentful misanthropy. A man of great talents can put on the mockery or semblance of feelings: but Lord Byron's

were too animated, and his words were too burning, to be suspected of being feigned, even if the history of his life had not proved that he was in reality what his poetry represented him to be.

How happens it, that so few of our poets have been content to rely on the expression of their own feelings, as a charm to captivate the reader? Have their feelings been too faint? or have they thought art more attractive than nature? If we look into poetical biography, we shall have no reason to suppose that the generality of them were endowed with any extraordinary intensity of feeling. *Gray* and *Cowper* had both excessive feeling; but then their timidity made them shrink from exposing it to the world; and the feeling of both was rather tender and contemplative, than impetuous: they had much sensibility, but little passion; they neither mingled with the world, nor invigorated

their impressions by adventure : a sameness of life, a lowness of spirits, and languor of action, made them familiar only with the tamer and more reflective sentiments, which impart a calm, rational, and philosophic pleasure, but give none of the intense emotion conveyed by the poetry of Lord Byron.

Something of this exhibition of violent impulse must be attributed to the crisis at which Lord Byron appeared in the world. It is not clear that it would have suited the public taste at the æra of *Gray* or of *Cowper*. No doubt, the French Revolution threw its own violent character on the literary world. The public feeling was accustomed to impressions of a much more energetic kind : the polish that weakened was now despised : freedom of thought, freedom of language, scorn of disguise, and hatred of all delicate fears, demanded impassioned views of things, and an indulgence of the re-

sults of all first impressions. This was exactly what suited the structure and habits of Lord Byron's mind and temper. I do not think that to this cause is to be attributed the formation of such a structure and habits; I think that in *him* they were *intrinsic* and original; but it is not improbable that he might never have exhibited them to the world at another crisis; or if he had, that they would not have been so favourably received.

The views of things taken by our passions require for the most part the correction of our reason: but those uncorrected views are often desirable to be known, and beautiful to contemplate; and the habits of a cold reasoning age are apt to present impressions too artificial and tame. Nothing is more common, than in the attempt to refine to let out all the strength.

If Lord Byron himself had led a confined, luxurious, fashionable life, all his

native impetuosity would have been damped, and the fire of his writings would have been much less ardent. But as he loved solitude, so also he loved the open air, to sport upon the ocean, to breathe in the fresh gale of the waters, to bask in the sun, to climb stupendous mountains, to sit upon giddy precipices, and to explore savage countries, amid the energy of dangers, and the novelty of strange manners.

A combination, therefore, of native genius, accidental character, and extraordinary course of adventurous life, contributed to produce from Lord Byron poetical works such as centuries are not likely to see come forth again.

It is probable that not one in tens of millions looks on nature with the same intense sensation of pleasure with which Lord Byron looked upon it: but if there are many, what avails it, unless they can convey the reflection of it to others with

the same power and brilliancy with which Lord Byron conveyed it? That power, mainly native, was yet augmented by perpetual exertion and practice. Not only the powers of expression greatly increase by exercise, but the acuteness of observation also, and the consequent force of impression. In proportion to the nicety of our observation, we feel; as we distinguish, we see new beauties; as the view breaks itself into clearness, we see with more precision the harmony of all the parts. All this is apparent in the progressive compositions of Lord Byron. The energy of his spirit made him still persevere, amid distractions and disappointments, and the gloom of an embittered temper.

LETTER XV.

June 6.

I DO not undertake to avoid repetitions in this enquiry into Lord Byron's genius: each day's discussion must be taken separate, and as a whole by itself; as representing the light in which the subject appears to me the day in which it is written.

I hear that the irritable passions which Lord Byron displayed in mixed society, at that period before his departure from England when he lived at all in the world, made him very offensive, and sometimes very ridiculous. It is probable that the consciousness and shame of this was among the causes which made him seek and love solitude.

This irritability is an unfortunate thing

for genius, but it is very common: perhaps not in the same degree as Lord Byron had it, because Lord Byron's passions were always more violent than those of other people. An early habit of mixing much in the world might have softened it; but then, probably, would have also had a strong effect in taming the energy of his genius. So it is, that good and evil is mixed in this world.

"And what," says the heartless worldling, "should we have lost, if not one of "Lord Byron's poems had ever appeared? "Poetry can never be more than an "empty bauble of momentary amuse-"ment! It can at best do no good; but "if it is malignant or false, it may do "much mischief."

It is not necessary to answer in detail such mean and frivolous sarcasms. The solid use of poetry requires at this day no exposition; and the value to the intellectual world, of such of Lord

Byron's poetry as is not overwhelmed by radical faults is so obvious, that to repeat the arguments on which it rests would be common-place. To encourage, by the force of brilliant fancy and powerful language, a lively sense of the beauties of nature, and a habit of energetic and pure sentiment, is to add essential riches to the dignity and virtue of the best part of our being.

But it may be answered, "Is it worth "the cost of insults and bitternesses com- "mitted by overbearing vanity and offen- "sive pride? What is there in Lord "Byron's poems which can repay this?"

There are two replies to this: —*first*, the evils are confined to a few; the good extended to many: — *secondly*, the evils, such as they are, may be avoided: it was not necessary for Lord Byron to go into general society; and, latterly, he did not do it.

Thus it is, then, in this life, that

seeming evils, which we lamented as associating themselves with good, sometimes become in fact *aids* to that very good. This very irritable temper so condemned, and so represented as a set-off, probably very essentially contributed to drive Lord Byron into that solitude, where his great genius could be best nurtured and cultivated.

I am firmly persuaded that whatever may be the moral benefits of a continual and wide mixture in society, that it very greatly and essentially damps the imagination, and dilutes and enfeebles the energies both of the heart and the mind. It may soften the temper, but it compromises our opinions and our principles. It is good for many; but there are *some* to whom the evil of it outweighs the good; and it is not improbable, that it might have been well for Lord Byron if he had never gone into society at all.

There is a good passage in the *Quar-*

terly Review, No. LIX., *April*, 1824, p. 40., (in the article on Rose's translation of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*,) in these words: —

"There are other indications of a just "confidence in his own strength, which "*Ariosto* discovers in common with the "early poets of most countries: for the "fact is, that such men write only be- "cause they feel the God struggling with- "in them: *Phœbi nondum patientes.* "It is for after ages to force those to be "poets, by artificial excitements, whom "nature never endowed with the re- "quisite gifts. No one can read either "the *Orlando*, or the *Inferno*, without ad- "miring the freshness, the vigour, the "originality of the poetry. The only in- "cense which such poets cast upon the "altar are *mascula thura*. There may be a "reckless disregard of propriety, grievous "violations of what is now called taste (an "idol that has unsinewed our style); but

" *Dante* and *Ariosto* were ambitious of " conveying to the minds of others the " impressions on their own, with force, " perspicuity, and exactness; and to effect " this, they cared not to stoop to the " meanest images," &c.

It is clear that Lord Byron also possessed these characteristics, in common with the early poets, and with DANTE and ARIOSTO. I cannot feel certain that he would not have possessed them, if he had mixed more with society: but I think that he would not. The invariable effect of society is to destroy originality, to produce sameness, to obliterate distinctions, and to throw an air of indifference and languor over hearts naturally ardent and enthusiastic. Thus minds, like stones on the sea-shore rolled smooth by the perpetual working of the waves, lose all prominence of shape and form.

It is by lonely musings, by fearless and unrecalled excursions in unbeaten paths,

that the vigour and novelty of greatness and individual undamped feeling is nursed and brought into day.

It is dangerous for secondary minds to trust too much to solitude; their abstruse and undirected labours are apt to end in fantastic eccentricities; their imagination, not strong enough to throw clear and true lights on the objects of their thoughts, is apt to fall into obliquity, and bring forth baseless and discoloured inventions.

Such persons may do well by the aid of the perpetual infusion of the minds of others; but they have not strength to go straight by their own power.

Lord Byron had, probably, always a will of his own, because his feelings were always too decided to leave him a choice of following that of others. It is this which gives a directness, reality, and certainty, to all, or almost all, his poems; which rouses the attention, and gives him a mastery over his reader, so unlike

the effect of minor poetry, that always has more or less the character of affectation and emptiness, and always seems something merely plausible, flowery, and decorative. Lord Byron enters like a master-spirit, and always keeps his reader in awe, as if a being of a higher cast of endowment was dealing with him. The poet's impressions are actual impressions, and therefore operate as essences on those on whom they are reflected.

I know not how it is that this intense susceptibility, either of outward images or inward sensations, is so very rare. It is true, that the susceptibility *may* exist, without the power of expressing its effects; but I do not think that it often *does*, at least in this high degree. We do not see such violence, such irritation, such active passion, as in Lord Byron.

There seems to be implanted in human beings, in a sort of mixed result of the head and heart, an instinct of *moral con-*

science ; a something too rapid, too sensitive, to be the result of reason, — of a mere operation of the understanding. But this varies in different persons, as much as any other qualities of the head, heart, temper, and form. I do not think that this was strong in Lord Byron : had it been stronger, it would have corrected the violence of many of his impressions ; and if it had softened and mellowed many features of his poetry, it would have damped and weakened others. Perhaps no other instance can be named, of one who, with such excessive susceptibility, had so little of this instinct, and yet was endowed with so much sense of grandeur and beauty, such a perception of all the excellences and all the niceties of poetry, such a fondness for meditation, such an acuteness of intellect, such a profound penetration into the recesses of the human mind and human bosom.

Providence, for its own inscrutable

purposes, suffers these strange contradictions in our frail being; but it has scarcely ever exhibited them in so striking a degree as in Lord Byron. The moral result of this extraordinary union would seem, to our bounded minds, calculated to produce prejudicial and pernicious effects. It would seem to show, that the gifts we are taught to admire and venerate are not incompatible with an insensibility to moral principles, and a reckless indulgence of fierce and destructive passions; a defiance of the happiness of others, and a gratification of *self*, without any regard to the consequences to society. It is impossible that this appalling counterpoise should not lessen our respect for genius, and chill our emulation to follow in its steps. It gives a vast advantage of attack to the numerous part of mankind, who were already sufficiently disposed to decry the noble pursuits of intellectual ambition: it refreshes and gives impulse

to those common-place railleries which had begun to lose their point and to be worn out; and it turns the high-minded refinements of poetry into a jest for the hard, cold, cautious, laborious reasoner, who deems eloquence an empty sound, and imagination a deluding vapour! At the same time it holds out a brilliant and attractive example for those who have nothing of genius but its extravagance, and nothing of sensibility but its vice.

If poetry does not soften our manners, and dulcify our hearts; if it aggravates misanthropy, and nurtures the poison of unrelenting revenge and venomous bitterness at every injury and offence, real or supposed; how assailable does it make itself to its enemies, and how indefensible to its friends!

If I could not have the poetry of Lord Byron without the cost of his countervailing objections, I would still desire to have

it in spite of the price. But was this counterbalance inseparable? I am afraid, that it was intertwined so deeply, that the separation was scarcely possible. I do not think that more modified energies would have produced it. Habits of modification tend to caution and to timidity. There is a responsibility which enchains vigour, and sits heavy upon hope. No being loves liberty like the Muse: but it may be said, that she ought not to love *licentiousness!* She must, however, be left to exercise the one or the other at her peril. Unfortunately, in Lord Byron's case, she sometimes passed the bounds; less often, however, than is supposed, except in *Don Juan*, and the *Vision of Judgment*.

There is a fervour in some minds, of which the fire cannot always be directed, but operates equally to good and to evil: but then in Lord Byron it was a native fire, not aided by the fanning of any factitious power.

All combinations which the imagination makes by rule and force; all which do not rise of themselves, and thus become actual experiences; are more or less *fantastic*, and partake of the character of pretension or simulation. And this always diminishes their weight or solidity, and the interest which it is requisite should attach to them. The reader seems to be trifled with, when that which is presented to him does not appear to have issued from the poet's own persuasion, and a resistless dominion over his belief.

If there be any improbability in the stories of the *Corsair*, *Lara*, the *Giaour*, &c., we still cannot doubt they are such as Lord Byron's mind believed probable; and such as it delighted his imagination to contemplate in actual existence. They, therefore, breathe all animation and life, as if he was describing real-

ities. What an author feigns by artifice and effort cannot either burn or breathe: it must be form and matter without soul.

But there may be life,—yet a *sickly* sort of life,—in which there is a vast abundance of the *falsetto;* a sort of factitious sentiment, in which the coarser practical passions affect to put on a flowery disguise of delicate sensibility; in which what is grossly sensual hypocritically pretends to cover itself with the garb of refinement,—and, therefore, is infinitely more pernicious than if it used broad terms.

I cannot think that Lord Byron's most licentious passages are half so dangerous to morals as these!—The highly visionary state, to which a more intense and more vigorous imagination elevates the mind, bears it up above the reach of low and sensual contagion; it carries it into

regions of purer air, where it drinks the nectar of inspiration, and bathes itself in that which will not so well mix with the impurities of earth.

LETTER XVI.

June 7.

I WILL here endeavour to make a summary of the poetical character of Lord Byron.

I must take poetry to be that which *Edward Phillips* (the nephew of Milton) takes it to be; viz. *an illustration or embodiment of some important moral truth, not drawn from individuality, but created by the imagination, by combining, with taste and judgment, ingredients selected from the stores of the fancy.*

A strict fulfilment of the whole of this definition would constitute the *highest* sort of poetry. There is certainly very *beautiful* poetry which in one or two points may fall short of this: such, for instance, as poetry which does not em-

body an *important moral truth;* but then it must be a *truth,* if not in a comprehensive sense, yet in a *partial* view,—in outward appearance, and in the view of the passions.

We know that to execute such a task must require a large portion of all the faculties and energies of the mind: *fancy* to collect the materials; *sensibility* of heart to supply the requisite emotions which ought to be associated with them; *observation* of life to show the course of human actions; *understanding* and *judgment* to trace things to their consequences, and teach final results; *imagination* to combine, embody, animate, and put into action; *language* to express adequately what the mind conceives; and *industry* and *spirit* to exert all these united powers.

All these, except the *judgment* which penetrated to final consequences, Lord Byron seems to have possessed in an

eminent degree: his defect is, that his truths are *partial* and *detached*. Minor poets do not represent truth at all, or the truths they represent are stale, flat, and insignificant.

When our imagination acts upon the impulse of our passions, it always paints things in stronger colours than reality. This is a property of our nature. It is well, therefore, that our passions should be virtuous and pure: otherwise, imagination under their influence will embellish *falsehood* rather than *truth*.

Lord Byron represented things in those glowing natural colours, in which they always appear to a rich imagination placed in similar circumstances, operating on a similar sensibility. And these were *inventions*, in which he dealt; not the mere reflections of his *fancy*. If they had been the *latter*, they must have belonged to an inferior class.

In what he did, therefore, he ap-

proached to perfection as a poet, with the single exception I have made. His imaginations were genuine imaginations in spirit and essence: they were brilliant, beautiful, fiery, and sometimes grand; and they are expressed with a transparency, an eloquence, a vigour, which show that he was carried forward by a true inspiration. They were inventions illustrative of what his passions and opinions dictated to him to be most attractive and gratifying. They represent nature, therefore, though under a particular but glowing face.

I know not how it is, but the common mode in which poets invent is different. They do not invent to illustrate any truth or supposed truth, but they invent without reference to either of these: they have nothing either of individual or general nature in their view; but they select particulars which will not combine, according to the whim which induces them to prefer one to another separ-

ately, —and thus there is no unity, no life, no nature, in their combinations. They put together things which will not amalgamate, but rather disgust by their apparent discordancy. They must be, because they either have no native imagination, or refuse to follow the lights of a native imagination.

The human mind, I suspect, is never fully impressed with a general truth or maxim, without forming to itself some imagined example, in which it contemplates its operation. A poet possesses this faculty and habit, both in its degree of animation, and in the dignified choice of objects, more strongly than any other; and it is by cultivating it in this manner, and for this purpose, that he can best perform his function in conveying both pleasure and knowledge, and in raising his art to the loftiest place amid the fruits of the human intellect.

As this is the most simple, so it is the

most easy for those who have the genuine endowments; while they who have not the genuine endowments ought never to touch the lyre.

I cannot forget that one of Lord Byron's longest and most celebrated poems is a delineation of *local* and *particular* scenery: I mean *Childe Harold.* It is quite impossible, that, with any regard to *principles,* this poem can contend in rank with his poetical *inventions.* I am aware that the public does not seem inclined to make this distinction. It seems solely to consider the brilliancy of the image reflected, whether it be a created or inventive image, or one directly derived from some actual external impression.

I do not say that it is a difference of any import to the reader, *provided* the image be equally brilliant and equally beautiful; but it imports much, as far as regards the power of the poet. It may,

however, be observed, that this *proviso* is scarcely ever fulfilled. It can hardly happen that it *is* equally brilliant and equally beautiful. In that which is a copy, there is always more or less of servility and constraint. This is apparent in several of the *local* descriptions in the *Childe Harold* of Lord Byron. They have not the freedom and fire of the descriptions in the *Corsair*, *Manfred*, &c.

It will be contended, that they have *more truth:* but this is not the case; they have not more *general* truth, nor even so much. What is accidentally and *individually* true, is often the reverse of a general truth.

In some respects, the same kind of poetical faculty is requisite to describe both these qualities of objects: the same skill in selection of circumstances is necessary in painting what actually exists, as in painting what is imagined; the same nicety of lights and shades; the

same distinctness of impression, and the same elegance, force, and harmony of language; the same pathos or beauty of sentiment, and the same strength and energy of thought and reflection.

It commonly happens, that he who has a bright and poetic fancy has also more or less of a bright poetic imagination; so that we are accustomed to expect the fruit of the latter power from him who has shown that of the *first;* but we often expect in vain: either from deficiency of strength, from timidity, or want of exertion, no such fruit appears.

Sometimes where the *fancy* is not very distinct and faithful, it happens that the *imagination* is very powerful. This is occasionally exhibited in that sort of grandeur which deals in the *indefinite*, and of which all the spell would be lost by minute and precise details. This is the sort of imagination, which deals in worlds of its own; which delights in

shadows that serve only as a veil for ideas of magnificence and wonder.

The innumerable set-offs from grandeur, beauty, and purity, which Providence permits in the actual scenery of nature, and in the actual occurrences of life, are such as a poet's imagination ought to take no notice of; but the knowledge that these *in fact* exist, destroys the illusion necessary to high poetical delight, when we read poetical descriptions professing to represent *actual* scenes and *actual* events. Nor can the poet's own mind ever detach itself entirely from the effects of them. It never, therefore, is under the same degree of inspiration and ideal possession, when it is describing *realities*.

We must estimate Lord Byron then by his *fictions*, not by his poetical descriptions of *his own* travels, and the feelings and observations to which they gave rise. And we must estimate these fictions,

first, according to the quality of their matter; and, secondly, according to their execution.

The imagery is often of the most exquisite cast of poetry; conceived with intensity of force, and expressed with intensity of feeling; created with that magical strength which bespeaks even *self-illusion* at the moment of describing it. Standing thus detached and separated from the incidents with which it is elsewhere involved, and which tend to lead the mind into a dangerous acquiescence in the union of imcompatible qualities, this imagery is beautifully or magnificently perfect; for thus *partially* viewed, it has *truth*, in addition to all its other poetical excellences. To doubt the poetical genius of such a man, is to doubt the heat of the sun, or the beauty of nature, or the fragrance of flowers! Faults without end, absurdities and follies, and

impurities and crimes, could not efface these breathing and inspired beauties.

Lord Byron's *imagination* was more noble, more beautiful, more pure, than the observations of his *understanding* were generous, kind, and correct, or his passions towards society amiable or virtuous. In the visions of imagination he beheld and felt what was grand, benevolent, fair, and tender: when he looked upon life he saw with a jaundiced eye; he saw and felt bitterness, injustice, and wrong, and yielded to the dominion of vice, rather than of goodness. This may account for the opposition which there is between the beauties and the faults of his poetry: a struggle between his *pure* imagination, and his *other* imagination, which drew its ingredients from the stores of his observation and experience among mankind.

If there be a disposition to be visionary, the same disposition very commonly

leads to a disregard, and perhaps disgust, of reality, as flat, coarse, and dissatisfactory. This incident is the usual bane of the poet's happiness; it makes him melancholy, indignant, and often misanthropic; it not only puts him out of humour with the world, but it puts the world out of humour with him; it induces the world to vilify his art, and calumniate his character and person; and gives it the pretence to allege that poetry is but the irritator of the passions, and the handmaid of those delusions which it is the business of wisdom to tear away.

LETTER XVII.

June 8.

THERE has prevailed in poetry, at various periods, a fashion, which commenced many centuries ago, of illustrating or embodying moral truths by *an allegorical personification of abstract ideas.* This, when carried to any length, is always tedious and dry; and often perplexed, or mixed up with absurdities. Even the genius of *Spenser* could not preserve it from these defects.

In later times *Collins* and *Gray* brought it into fashion, in short lyrical pieces; but their imitators surfeited the public with it, and drove the next generation to resort again to simpler narrative, and the more natural and more lively interest springing from the representation of human beings in action. In the Ode to

Fear, to *Pity*, to *the Passions*, to *Adversity*, &c., we admire the nicety and spirituality of the conception, the genius in the choice of attributes, and the happiness, the force, and the harmony of the language; but still we want a little more of the purple stream of material life, the glow of veins, the breath of human existence, the grace of visible form, and the energy of passion operating on substantial imagery.

I think these are requisites which may fairly be demanded by the most highly-gifted and highly-polished taste; but it cannot be wonderful that they should be demanded by the multitude: — it *is* wonderful that the multitude could ever have relished these *allegorical descriptions*, for which a preparation of speculative and almost metaphysical thought, not at all adapted to common capacities and common pursuits, would seem necessary. In fact, I do not believe that the multitude

ever *did* relish them: it echoed what it was the fashion of its superiors to praise; but it echoed it heartlessly and without sympathy. At that time, the mind of every dull and ignorant person was not set free, and encouraged to think, judge, and taste for itself.

It is to the change operated on the human mind by the French Revolution, that we must attribute much of the very opposite fashion in poetry that soon followed. Some of the chains that were then unloosed were *well* unloosed; but in setting free those who ought *not* to be bound, it also set free great numbers who *required* bonds. Liberty soon grew into licentiousness; and all sorts of absurdities were committed by those who had not the qualities to be trusted to their own wills. To go from one extreme to another, its opposite, seems to be a frailty to which the imperfection of humanity is invariably destined. From *that*, therefore,

which was *too abstract*, over-refined, and spiritual, the writers and readers of poetry now plunged into the very thick of coarse and rude society, and drank at the cup of inspiration furnished by the energy of the uncultivated mob.

It seems to me that this arose, on the part of the men of genius who encouraged it, from a *misapprehension* of the nature of the defects in the discarded school of poetry, which required to be amended. The want of deep energy and interest did not arise from the *over-polish* of the materials hitherto used; but from their *intrinsic* quality; from their mere spirituality and abstractedness.

If man were all he is by nature, and nothing by culture, then I can conceive that in the energies of savage life we might find the best subjects of poetry. But Providence has ordained that we should do much for ourselves; and that as man is to get his bread by the sweat of

his brow, so he is to bring forth the fruits of the mind by equal labour.

There is, however, in the uniformity of a state of manners very highly polished a sort of faintness and tameness, which is very inimical to the force of colours and of feelings requisite to glowing poetry.

I know not whether Lord Byron had clearly conceived in his mind these conflicting difficulties, and taken his choice on the deliberate dictate of his judgment thus exercised. It is more probable that an intuitive impulse directed him. But he seems to have chosen well a line fitted to escape from these contending obstacles. In the subjects he adopted, taken from countries remote from our own; of manners wild and free, yet associated with all our ideas of early refinement and classical taste; he was at liberty to unite the most splendid energies with the most exquisite imaginings of cultivated literature. And he has often succeeded to a degree

which, the more we reflect upon it, will the more excite our surprise and admiration. In *him* are to be found the highest flights of poetical *invention* combined with all the intensity of human passions, and all the palpitating interests of our frail earthly composition: in *him* are to be found the far-piercing visionary conceptions, reached only by the profundity of thought, led on by the light of the most polished literature, in union with those unchastised and unchilled energies, which it has been supposed could only exist among the artless and the rude.

I know not that Lord Byron deals any where in rude and uncultivated nature; nor does he any where omit to exercise the *understanding* as well as the imagination. In truth, I have never yet found a poet of deep interest, whose imagination was not enriched, directed, and controuled, by a powerful *understanding*, and where the understanding did not

form an important ingredient in the quality of his *inventions*. I do not much value a poem which solely exercises the imagination, without touching the heart or informing the understanding.

It is not improbable that, at another æra of society, Lord Byron would not have ventured to have treated the same topics, or, at least, to have treated them in the same manner; for we do not find the *greatest* genius entirely above the influence of his age. Lord Byron was one who could not go well in *trammels:* while kept down by forms, he would have appeared but a common writer.

Thus it was that men set him the example of emancipation, who could not use it as he used it; men whom it conducted only into absurdities, while it led *him* into a display of the most extraordinary genius. It led him sometimes, perhaps, to trust his own understanding too much on subjects on which he had had

no opportunity to enquire and to meditate, and tempted him to the views taken rather by his passions than his reason: but still the lights he reflected were those in which things actually appeared to him; and in this narrow sense, therefore, were true representations. When *erroneous*, they still had many of the tints of truth, and all its earnestness and freedom from affectation. No false ingredient ever enters into them; though some true ones may be wanting to produce the just result.

LETTER XVIII.

June 9.

MAN is born with a capacity which enables him and impels him to form out of the materials presented to his senses something more beautiful than reality. This capacity is *imagination:* — it is the food of hope, and the inspirer of all noble and refined sentiments; and it is the poet's function to embody these visionary pictures; to convey them to weaker minds in more palpable shapes, and more glowing colours; and to assist them in the birth of those sentiments and reflections to which they are fitted to give rise.

The productions of the genuine poet are the fruit and flowers of nature cultivated by his labour and skill: those of the false poet are artificial; they are the fabrics of his own hand, made to *imitate*

the growth of nature, but without life or fragrance.

Lord Byron was never known to produce artificial flowers instead of real ones: he sometimes produced *weeds*, and now and then flowers and fruits which were *poisonous*, but always the vigorous growth of nature.

There is something very grand in that faculty, which can thus form to itself a rich creation of its own; yet still preserving *verisimility* to nature, — and therefore calling forth the sympathy of all highly endowed minds.

Lord Byron enjoyed with an inexpressible fervour the magnificent and ever-varying shapes which the scenery of the earth displays to those who will explore it, and he found his imagination constantly refreshed and exerted to new movements by it; and the fertility of his understanding, and the activity and strength of his feelings, always enriched

material appearances with powerful intellectual associations.

Such a perpetual tumult of violent emotions as that in which Lord Byron lived perhaps contributed to shorten his existence: it was a fever which had a direct tendency to wear him out; and weakened him for the attack of any accidental illness, which thus became irresistible. If there be any one who is not affected and awed by so sudden a dissolution of so many extraordinary endowments; of gifts of nature so very brilliant; of acquisitions so unlikely to recur; of such a fund of images and sentiments; and observations, and reflections, and opinions, so matured, so polished, and so habituated to be ready to pour themselves forth to the world on every occasion; he must be a creature totally insensible and stupidly indifferent to all those instinctive sympathies which make us regard with af-

fection and pride the intellectual and more dignified part of our being. He who is himself feeble in intellect is yet commonly conscious of its value; he admires and views with awe the high in talent; he envies, and would desire to possess what is thus denied to him; he may not adequately admire the brilliancy of the prospect, when the sun lights it up; but he feels a deep chill and loss of pleasure when the sun retires, and leaves all before him an indistinct mass of darkness. Lord Byron was often, in truth, a sun that lighted up the landscapes of the earth, and penetrated into the human heart, and surrounded its altar with beams of brightness.

His death is an awful dispensation of Providence, and humbles the pride of man's ambition, and of his self-estimation. In the eye of Providence those powers we estimate so loftily must be as nothing, or we cannot persuade ourselves

they would be thus suddenly cut off before their time.

But to *our* narrow ken, the splendid genius of Lord Byron must still be considered of mighty import. Yet it is the inseparable lot of man "not to know "the full value of a treasure till it is "taken from us." Highly as we admired Lord Byron in his life, we shall admire him, if possible, infinitely more, now that he is gone. Variety will not make amends for intenseness in particular paths: but Lord Byron had both unequalled variety and intenseness in *all*. He had not only the supremacy of a sublime, sombre, melancholy, mysterious imagination; but he had an inexhaustible fund of wit and humour, and a most precise and minute knowledge of all the details of common life; a familiarity with all its habits and expressions; a lively and perfect insight into all its absurdities; and a talent of exposing them, so

practised, so easy, and so happy, that it might be supposed he had never wandered into the visionary, and never occupied himself with any thing but the study of the follies of man in familiar society. The alternate and opposite ability of throwing off the incumbrance of all degrading circumstances from imagery, which is the characteristic of the higher poetry, and *that* of *bringing forth* those very set-offs for the purposes of degradation, seems to require such contrary habits of attention, as well as of temper and feeling, that they have been scarcely ever united in the same person. Nor is it much less extraordinary, that in this, as in his graver imagination, all is faithful to nature: there is no exaggeration; the points selected for his wit and humour are sketched with admirable exactness; nay, the surprising *likeness* is one of the great attractions of this comic painting.

This exquisite keenness in the survey of the human character must have contributed, as well as Lord Byron's fiercer passions, to make mixed society often uneasy to him. He must have seen too much of what was veiled to common eyes; he must have seen too plainly the workings of envy, jealousy, hate, meanness, and folly; he must have pierced disguises in a moment, and lost all interest in what appeared *attractive* to *others*, but *hollow* to *him*.

He who can thus have things at his command, and can in solitude wield them at his will, may well prefer the mode of life in which his genius may work most freely. Such faculties must have been impeded in company; and the time thus spent must have been lost. Perhaps it was good for the vigour of his mind, and the poetical fruits he gave to the world, that he passed so much of his time, after arriving at manhood, in foreign countries. It is not so easy for a man of a

certain rank to live in solitude in his own country: he cannot do so without being liable to mortifications and misconceptions which tend to chill his spirit, and diminish his self-complacence: — there is, besides, the hope of novelty and animation of adventure in locomotion and change of countries. The *choice* of countries and climates also is a great advantage; as it may involve the superiority of striking scenery, and of a genial sun.

It did do so in Lord Byron's case, when he chose Spain, Portugal, Switzerland, Italy, and Greece. I cannot doubt that a genial sun and sublime scenery contribute to the warmth and vigour of genius. The poetry of every country has always partaken of the character of the climate. A thousand causes go to set the imagination in motion: it will not act when damped and clouded by dulness: it requires an energy of spirit,

a freshness of impulse, a beam of hope, and a sense of enjoyment, or, at least, of high susceptibility, and tremulous movement.

It is singular that the very great degree of excitement, both of intellect and passion, in which Lord Byron lived, should never have proceeded to mental derangement. I think that his mind was kept sound by the variety of his faculties, and by the strength of his intellect, which operated as a counterpoise to the violence of his imagination. His elasticity of talent was more striking than can be instanced in any other genius.

Lord Byron may have talked as much as he would of his defiance of fame and celebrity: he would not have written with the daring and happy energy with which he *has* written, except under the nurturing and creative warmth of public admiration: all that ease and boldness of conception, by which he seems in

very carelessness to attain his highest beauties, would never otherwise have been ventured to be indulged in. Discouragement and fear would never have reached such freedom and vigour of power. Labour, care, art, diffidence, never yet reached it. The attraction is in the mastery, — in the dominion over his subject, and over his readers.

This sort of intellectual empire is the most gratifying of all others to the spirit of man, — at least to the spirit of a noble-hearted man! It is sufficient to create that impulse which is in itself almost powerful enough to generate genius.

Did then Lord Byron abuse his endowments? As there were other causes to embitter his heart and his temper, it must be admitted that he *did sometimes* revenge them by a licentious use of his genius.

LETTER XIX.

June 10.

I HAVE made an allusion to *Don Juan*, in pp. 239, 240. of *Coningsby* (1819); and I still retain identically the same opinion of that strange but most eloquent, as well as most humorous, poem. It is, no doubt, very licentious in parts, which renders it dangerous to praise it very much; and makes it improper for those who have not a cool and correct judgment, and cannot separate the objectionable parts from the numerous beautiful passages intermixed. But no where is the poet's mind more elastic, free, and vigorous, and his knowlege of human nature more surprising.

I cannot help recurring to the characteristic in which the superiority of Lord Byron is always uninterruptedly display-

ing itself: — this is, the *genuineness* of his imagination, which is always a picture of *existences*, either material or visionary; whereas almost all other poets, — at least all not of the very highest class, — deal principally in the imagination, or poetry, of *mere words*.

It is in vain that the cold-hearted, the cold-headed, and the stupid, would decry, as empty and useless, this mighty faculty, this imagination which creates existences whether spiritual or representative of matter. These existences form as much a part of the mortal being of those on whom nature has conferred active and warm intellects, as the earth and its produce, whether animate or inanimate. The properties of matter are not the only properties fitted to give pleasure or satisfaction to man. Every thing is more or less what the mind makes it. It is, therefore, in the power of the brilliant poet to create all the best enjoy-

ments of our terrestrial abode; to multiply, to refine, and to change the very nature of our pleasures here. To whatever occasional excess this may be carried, however it may sometimes disease the mind, and, by awakening too much sensibility, disqualify it for some of the coarser, yet not less necessary, duties of life, still these occasional abuses can by no means counterbalance its uses. There may be *some* to whom it may be dangerous or pernicious food; some who, destined to perform mean functions and low corporeal labours, would be rendered unhappy by more sensibility of fancy or expanse of intellect. But it might as well be contended that *all* ranks of society should have the *hard* hand and *muscular* arm of a day-labourer, as that they should have *his* coarse thoughts, and *his* material understanding.

To be *fantastic* is as mischievous as it is foolish; but true imagination can

always be infallibly distinguished by the test of the sympathy it excites. We *wonder* at what is fantastic; we embrace as an *intimate* what is just; we persuade ourselves that we have perceived and felt the same; and we are elevated in our own estimation at these kindred impressions with genius. Affectation always relies on its *singularity:* genuine power on its *sympathy*.

To describe what others have described, — not to consult the movements of the heart, or the observations of the mind, but the *memory*, — is so much easier for artificial faculties, that we cannot be surprised that it is generally practised. Thus the same ground is tilled over and over again, till its strength and essence are exhausted; while richer soils are left totally uncultivated and untouched.

Lord Byron brings his vigorous powers into the field; and wherever he throws his magic hand, rich flowers and fruits of

fresh flavour spring up in inexhaustible abundance. The reader wonders that fields of such fertility have never been pierced before; and begins to think it is the magician's spell, that can turn every thing it handles into gold. In truth, what cannot genius, thus energetic and strong, and thus practised, perform? Knowledge, deep thought, and glowing sentiment, hang on every trifle, and swarm round the leaves of every tree, shrub, and flower.

Wherever Lord Byron has given any images, sentiments, or thoughts as his own, there is no reason to suspect that he has imputed to them more force than his own mind and bosom bore witness to. If, therefore, there are to be found in his numerous poems frequent passages of noble thoughts and generous and affecting feelings, they are such as on those occasions must have been the inmates of his own soul and heart. They show

themselves by their freshness and nature never to be put on, — never worn as a dress.

Lord Byron was himself the being of imagination, whose character breaks out in all his writings: his life was that of the wild magical spirit, of which the feelings, the adventures, and the eccentricities, astonish and enchant us in his *inventions*. The public notoriety of this makes us receive much from *him*, which in *others* might be deemed exaggerated and over-wrought. A character and life so singular will always add interest to the writings of the poet. Another mode of life might possibly have produced poetry not less full of power, but it would not have been the same sort of power: — it might have had more sobriety and regularity; it would *not* have had the same raciness, and, probably, not the same originality and force: it would have left all the ground untouched where

Lord Byron has shown most genius and most novelty, and upon which no one is likely to follow him. If he has done wrong, if the evil parts overbalance the good, so much the worse for the value of his genius. But do they overbalance the good? It is not evil to detect and expose hypocrisy; it is not evil to pierce the disguise of meretricious love; and the picture which renders it *ridiculous* will avail beyond a thousand thundering sermons!

But they who are angry with the foulness of the prurient curiosity that detects, would not scruple to be guilty of the crime detected! Such pictures are, indeed, a compound of good and ill: they may corrupt some innocent minds, while they may check in their course of vice others already corrupted. But this is a great set-off to the objections even of some of the least defensible parts of Lord Byron's works.

There is a very doubtful good in believing the mass of mankind much more virtuous than they are, and thus increasing the success of hypocrisy and insincerity. If they are represented worse, the falsehood of the representation will recoil upon the author.

LETTER XX.

June 11.

If I could believe that the sentiments which a poet had expressed in his writings, and which formed their principal attraction, were such as he disclaimed in private, or turned into ridicule, whether from the heart, or from affectation, I should cease to have any admiration either of the man or of the writings, however strongly I might have felt admiration before I knew of this insincerity. But though I hate affectation, I would prefer that the ridicule should be affected, rather than the sentiments affected.

There are men who would be good, if they had the firmness to withstand the infection of the example of others;—men who cannot resist, when in society, to do

as others do, and to affect to think as others think; and who, by a strange infatuation, *pretend* to the vices which they abhor; who are afraid of being thought more pure and scrupulous than others, and, therefore, put on the air of selfish worldlings.

In the closet their spirits and sentiments recover the right tone, and *there* they are themselves again. But, unfortunately, the *reverse* of this is also often true; for in some the character which shows itself in society is the true, and that which displays itself in the closet is the affected. And when the affectation is once known, one is apt to lay the affectation to the side of purity and virtue. A nice distinguisher, who sees them both in operation, may decide rightly; but in common cases doubt must intervene, and destroy all confidence.

I never could understand by what obliquity of mind a man could reconcile to

himself to be in the constant habit of holding out to the public *that* which in private he laughed at and despised. If true, why laugh at it? if false, why hold it out to the public, as a noble course of sentiment and thought, and as a subject of admiration? Does he justify himself by such arguments as the following:—"I "know that things are not in fact so, and, "therefore, among my intimate and en- "lightened friends I will not pretend to "think them so; but the silly public may "be gulled; and as the cheat may be be- "neficial to public morals, I will do what "I can to help it on."

There are some depraved minds which glory in nothing so much as in the ingenuity with which they can delude the public. Surely this is but a higher species of *swindling!* The heart must be in a similar state of corruption with that of the *swindler!* The face must always

wear an equal disguise, and falsehood must equally dwell upon the lips.

I can hardly imagine to myself a baser-minded person, than one who places all the charm of his public productions upon delicacy and tenderness of sentiment, and who in private feels and shows extreme contempt for those who have what he deems the folly to indulge and act upon such delicacy and tenderness in *real* life. Yet I know that such characters are very common; but I persuade myself that there are always *marks* of the deception in their *very writings*. I have never yet seen reason to doubt about the tests of sincerity: false pretension and affected goodness are always laboured, over-ornamented, over-refined, over-polished, and far-sought: they meet the ear, and look glittering to the eye, but never touch the heart.

There is an earnestness, a freshness, a carelessness, a rapidity, even a violence,

in what is sincere: the sentiment and thought completely predominate over the language, — and words break out which identify themselves with the peculiar character of the writer.

There are mechanical artists and false conjurers in poetry, as in every thing else, who operate their wonders on the public mind by mere ingenious trick: but the trickery and the reputation of such persons explode with time; they catch a short-lived attention, and then grow flat and wearisome: — the colours of nature only never fade nor lose their charm.

I consider these *artists* to do more injury to the cause of true poetry than all its other numerous and vehement enemies. They bring it into suspicion, and give colour to the charges of delusion, exaggeration, false colouring, false excitement, wordiness, and emptiness: they make good the censure of conveying erroneous

views of life, and assuming feelings which are merely factitious and deceitful.

This is, however, a sort of poetry more often to the taste of the multitude than the true. Truth is often less striking, less glaring, less prominent, than what is artificial and exaggerated by human contrivance.

It does not seem to me that a poet's occasional coincidence with another great poet, or an occasional imitation of such other, or even use of his words, is a decisive proof of the insincerity of the former. It may *originate* in coincidence, not in imitation; and then the coincidence itself would revive in a strong memory the very words of his predecessor, which, while they are present to his mind, he may be unable, unwilling, or careless to reject. It is the manner of using them, the novelty of combination, the adaptation to what precedes and follows, which must justify the imitation,

and take nothing from the character of *him*, whose strength ought to lie in invention.

A ductile mind of great genius sometimes catches a flame, which was not inherent in it, from *another;* and this flame, when *that* from which it was reflected is withdrawn, may cease. If its brilliancy and warmth never appeared except where there was a coincidence, then its power must be decisively taken to be merely secondary and derivative.

In numerous walks of poetry Lord Byron seems to have been excited, by an internal consciousness of power, to try his strength against the most celebrated of his predecessors and contemporaries. It was this, perhaps, that sometimes gave him the *appearance* of imitation, and tempted him actually to *imitate;* for his memory and vast force of mind gave him a great talent at imitation, when he chose. He has been accused not only of being a great

imitator, but a *plagiarist*. I think that he began as an imitator before he felt his own strength; and that, for the reason I have given, it was always easy to him to imitate; and that he was sometimes inclined to indulge in it, even to the *last*. Perhaps he is almost the only writer of whom the occasional habit of imitation does not raise in *my* mind the slightest suspicion of his own barrenness, want of originality, or insincerity.

It is quite impossible for any person of sagacity and sound discrimination to *doubt* the *original* powers of his mind. There is no poet, except *Shakspeare*, in whom passages of more unquestionable or more intense originality are to be found; — passages not of perverse and unnatural novelty, but which are at once new and just.

No poet has given stronger proofs of having viewed nature with his own eyes, rather than "through the spectacle of

" books," and having felt from the unborrowed impulses of his own bosom, and described from what was within him. He was in the habit of exercising on all occasions his own understanding; and the very irritability and uneasiness of his temper often added force to the keenness of his observation. He had no necessity to seek for stimulants in factitious and feigned ardours; he wanted no provocatives in the array of gorgeous language, or exaggerated images; his conceptions were always still more active and more energetic than his *words*, and his mind was in a state of fervid emotion which required no aid from *without*.

LETTER XXI.

June 12.

He who spends much time in society at that early period of life when manners are best formed, and polish is easiest gained, is likely to break in upon those habits of study and reflection by which alone genius is cherished, and abilities are rendered useful. Such society, especially *fashionable* society, at that important period of existence, when fancy ought to be laying in her stores, is almost sure to chill and eradicate the enthusiasm necessary for high poetry.

I cannot think that if Lord Byron, instead of adopting the eccentric course which he embraced, had passed much of his time in the high circles of London, from the age of *eighteen* to *thirty*, that he would have written or attempted one

of his loftier or more brilliant poems : he would, perhaps, have been a sarcastic and witty *satirist*, and would have written *epigrams* and *sprightly songs* : — caustic poison, which sinks the energy and eradicates the spirit of the human mind !

I take nothing to be more injurious to the necessary stimulants by which the movements of society are carried on, than that base artifice of *heartless sneer*, by which people of the world, of moderate abilities and acquirements, affect airs of superiority over the activity and vigour of those whom they are incapable of following. The *nil admirari* is one of the most scoundrel tricks of *mediocrity*, if not of absolute *poverty*, of head and heart, which can be resorted to, and which is so very generally resorted to, by the base-minded of the higher ranks. The intention is to raise the belief that they have not excelled in what is set up as the object of admiration solely because they

have considered it not worth attaining! and that the admiration conferred is the effect of an ignorance which they despise and pity!

But these *contemptible contemners* are not aware how little a way such negative superiority, or rather *pretence* to superiority, goes. They may wrap themselves up in their own consequence, and dream of their own greatness; but it is known to none except themselves. The "*could-if-they-would*" people are a very equivocal sort of gentry, whose powers, if brought to the test, would commonly be found very deficient. Men, plausible in words, and quick in conversation, and who have given their minds to this sort of excellence, are seldom any thing *beyond.* What appears ingenious and just in the rapid passage of conversation, where there is not time to examine, proves itself to be absurd, or superficial, or nonsensical, or trite, when put upon paper. If it pretend

to *novelty*, it is merely new as regards the person addressed; and so little originates from the addresser, that it may be found better said in a thousand books, and from a thousand mouths. Its whole value, therefore, depends on the occasion, and from the opportunity seized, of its being the readiest and best supply to be had at the moment.

Men are always full of conceit who thus deal in ready-made ideas: they admire themselves for the facility and fluency with which they utter them, and forget that in *uttering* they do not *create;* that all the trouble and all the merit belongs to those who preceded them in the work; that they add nothing, improve nothing, correct nothing; that they only go with the stream, and are as likely to aid *error* as spread *truth.*

It is the lot of very few to think *originally*, and to think with truth and force;—the generality, therefore, are not

blamable for not doing *that* which nature has denied them the power to do; but they are deeply blamable for endeavouring, by mean artifices, to gain the credit of superiority over that of which they are but the mere mechanical echoes; and without which, therefore, they could not move a step in their own claims to notice.

I cannot for a moment believe, that Lord Byron, great as his memory was, and versatile as were his talents, could, if he had been checked in the due course of his genius, have acted this sort of *secondary* part. I do not think that he would have been ready in repeating the common-place ideas of others: he would have often been confused; the intervention of the supplies and sallies of his own mind would have disturbed the flow; and the very efforts that proved the struggles of a native power would have been interpreted as weakness and occasional incapacity.

But these people, who talk with such airs of superiority, wish it to be believed, that if they are not *writers* as well as *talkers*, it is because they disclaim to make their powers in this way known. To these may be applied what *Edward Phillips* says, when speaking of poetry: —

"For those who pretending, and perhaps not without reason, to poetical fancy or judgment equal to many that have written with applause, yet nevertheless have contented themselves to be wise, ingenuous, or judicious only to themselves, not caring to transmit any memorials to posterity; certainly those men, though able to contend with Apollo himself, cannot in reason challenge to themselves a place among the poetical writers, except upon the testimony of some very authentic author."

How often do we recollect men who have continued to raise a high opinion

of themselves by management and mystery; and who at length coming before the world *in propria persona*, by some published work, have put an end to the charm, and shown that their pretensions were all vapour.

We meet with thousands of men who can *talk* well, for one who can *write* well: the scrutiny which the *litera scripta* affords is more severe than any but a few gifted persons can abide; for it remains before every one, to be put in all lights, and sifted in every direction: — it has no aid of voice, tone, look, gesture; it cannot humour the temper or prejudices of each individual hearer; it cannot soften or enforce; it cannot compress or expand; it aspires to be always the same; to be a general truth, uncompromising, unqualifying, unbending, eternal: — it may be compared and contrasted, and the day for detection, if borrowed, never expires, —

so that there is no *limitation*, which gives a title by lapse of time.

The faculty, which is thus subject to tests so much more severe than others are exposed to, must be necessarily of a far higher order.

LETTER XXII.

June 13.

HAVING said so much about Lord Byron's gloom, and the bitterness of soul which attended the course of his life, the question may still be raised, whether, on a balance of his pleasures and his pains, he was less happy than others. It cannot be doubted that he often experienced intense delights, to which common minds must be strangers, and which even minds of genius, if less powerful than his own, must feel with comparative faintness. And if his *pangs* were more acute, it is the contrast of woe which most heightens our joys!

The fervor of Lord Byron's impressions, the fertility, and brilliancy, and expanse of his imaginings, could not but bring with them enjoyment which may ac-

curately be called *inexpressible*. Labour, and effort, and art, are painful and exhausting; but the freedom with which Lord Byron wrote must have enabled him to derive great pleasure from composition.

That sort of life which there is in Lord Byron's images and sentiments could only have emanated from his own experience; and we can estimate the intenseness of that life by the sympathetic language which describes it. When once we can come to describe *woe itself*, part of its sting has lost its poison.

Let us recollect how large a portion of Lord Byron's days must have passed in this sort of composition; and if this portion was happy, then, could sorrow and suffering be justly said to predominate with *him?*

I suspect *ennui*, languor, and indifference, to be the condition least easy to endure. Activity and energy of mind

always furnish resources and gleams of hope in the midst of difficulties, dangers, vexations, and even torments. The exhaustion which follows energy makes repose luxury. Lord Byron's passions were often dark and fierce, as well as impetuous; but then the return of gentleness, affection, and admiration, must have thrilled with double ecstasy through all his veins.

It seems to me, that it is *imagination* which gives light, beauty, and interest to all the appearances and incidents of life; and that without imagination they are coarse and dull.

This compound of imagination and feeling passes unheeded by common eyes: all the creations which flit before the poet's sight, and all the emotions which hurry through his bosom, are invisible and insensible to the ordinarily constituted being. If, then, the poet leaves them untold, no one will guess

that they had ever been! Perhaps even *he himself* is not fully conscious of them in the rapidity of their actual appearance: it is in the ingredients which they furnish to the fancy; it is in the visionary and spiritual revival, when all that is material is removed, that their fullest force and splendour is felt.

We must not, therefore, always judge of a poet by the moodiness with which he seems to receive pleasures at the moment they are offered to him. It is in the *hope* and in the *reflection* that the fulness and splendour of his delight lies. It is in solitude, when imagination is his only companion, and when he is veiled from all mankind, that his true enjoyments are experienced.

The world sees the poet in his scorns, his hatreds, his quarrels, his confusions, and his absurdities; chilled by neglect, irritated into wrong by supposed affronts, putting his breast against the sword of

his enemy by his incautious impetuosity, and dragged at the heels of an insulting and cruel conqueror, who has prostrated him by perfidy and guile. His hours of glory and intense delight are passed in retreats which it cannot penetrate, in scenery which it has no visual capacity to discern, in sensations too nice for the hardness of its heart.

It judges, therefore, only by that which comes within its own powers of observation; and it deems the poet the least enviable and the most unhappy of beings. It cries, "What are all these tinkling "rhymes, these idle plays of words "worth, to be set against so much suf- "fering, so much absurdity, and so "much offensiveness, as we see in the "poet?"

But these *tinkling rhymes*, these *idle plays of words*, are the spells that not only turn the poet's own existence into pleasure, but elevate the qualities and

capacities of the doubtful and changeable being of human nature; that light up the flame of a higher state of enjoyment infused into us, which, if we neglect it, will expire in darkness, and be as if it had never been imparted.

LETTER XXIII.

June 14.

In different humours or different days, we do not always see things in exactly the same aspect. Objects viewed on contrary sides have often a very dissimilar appearance. Lord Byron has had violent censurers as well as enthusiastic admirers; and they who have taken part against him are not without their strong positions and strong arguments.

There is no doubt that the *imagination* and the *passions* act and re-act on each other, in heightening colours and feelings; and that there is a natural course pursued by the bad passions as well as by the good.

We must ascertain, therefore, the *moral* character of the passion on which ima-

gination operates, or which operates on imagination, before we can determine whether the operation is beneficial or mischievous. All the passions to which we have a *natural* propensity are not *therefore* to be indulged; but we are placed between desire and our duty, that we may give a proof of resistance to temptation.

It is not, therefore, the brilliancy of imagination which is sufficient, without a due consideration of the use made of that brilliancy. If it be used to heighten what ought to be controuled and lowered, it cannot be defended. No impression of the fancy, no emotion of the heart, is admissible in its first impulse, unqualified by the influence of the understanding and the reason. That the representation of such impressions and emotions is highly gratifying to the popular taste, is no proof of its merit; because the mass of mankind will always feel delight in

the gratification of their passions, whether evil or good.

Splendid imagination, therefore, is a fearful gift, which may be a blessing or a curse, according to the manner in which it is exercised, disciplined, and applied.

I think that these must be taken to be true, as *general positions*. How far they apply to Lord Byron's poetry, is another question. If he represents worldly pleasures in those detached points of view, in which all their attractions, and none of their attendant evils, are displayed, he abuses the vast faculties of genius conferred on him by nature. The *end* of all literature is *wisdom* and *truth;* and therefore *these* must especially be the *end* of *poetry*, if poetry be the highest species of literature, — and *pleasure* can only be the *means*. If, therefore, pleasure be the sole end effected, the poetry cannot be legitimate, because it will not

have produced a legitimate end. The proof, then, that it gives lively and even intense pleasure to a fine imagination is not a conclusive proof that it is perfect poetry.

But we must not lightly assume that Lord Byron's compositions have offended against these principles, — at least in their general character, and upon a *balance* of what constitutes their strength. It can scarcely be denied that they sometimes incur this charge. If the detached virtues which the poet sometimes ascribes to his heroes are painted naturally, as well as forcibly, he does not always bring forward duly the revolting horrors and frightful consequences of the crimes which he chooses to unite to these virtues. On the other hand, he is a little too much inclined to bring into broad display the counteracting errors, defects, and crimes, by which illustrious characters, on whom the world has con-

ferred admiration, have been sometimes debased.

These are extremes into which he has been sometimes led by a course of sentiment and thought, and a line of fiction, which, on deep consideration, will not be found to have the tendency, or deserve the character that superficial readers and critics have assigned to them. One of the grand faults of mankind, which Lord Byron's temper, the impulses of his heart, and the vigour of his faculties, prompted him to combat and expose, was *hypocrisy* and *false pretension.* He saw with indignation the unjust estimate of character the world was accustomed to make, and the flagrant wrong with which it was accustomed to distribute admiration, honours, and rewards. He bent, therefore, the whole force of his mighty faculties to expose these absurdities in striking colours; to throw a broader light on their real features; and to draw the veil

from the *cloven* foot, and the *satanic* qualities which had hitherto been concealed.

He would plead, that, in detecting *vice* under the robe of *virtue*, he was not warring with virtue's cause, but supporting it; and that the cry of alarm was but the interested and corrupt cry of those, who could not bear that their own cloak of disguise should be torn from them!

But has he not, in the effort to pull down hypocrisy, set up naked and audacious crime? This is the charge against him; and it is, indeed, a charge which has sometimes a strong appearance of being well founded. All powers of great energy will occasionally overshoot the mark: the decision must be made according to the *predominance* of good or evil. We must estimate by the *comparative* mischief of the character *elevated*, and the character *depressed*, by these exhibitions. Now daring and *open* crime always brings

with it its own antidote; but *concealed* rottenness works under ground, covered with flowers, and spreads diseases and pestilence, without a suspicion whence the sufferings and the destructions come, — and, therefore, continues to prostrate its victims, unchecked by its success, and uncorrected by time.

It has been said that Lord Byron's censures were not the accents of *satire*, but of grief. He employed, however, the most poignant irony and ridicule for the same purposes as those for which he employed the tones of indignant sorrow. And here again, perhaps, he may be entitled to a similar defence against the attacks which have been made upon him, to that which has been already suggested.

He has been accused of jesting at all female virtue, of painting women in the most dissolute colours, — and yet of employing the whole force of his brilliant imagination to make licentious pleasures

attractive and seducing. On a superficial view, at least, this charge has a plausible basis. But many ingenious things may be said on the other side; and I am not sure that they are not as solid as ingenious, though some may think them too far-fetched.

Against those vices which fashion sanctions, grave and vehement indignation goes for nothing. Happy and poignant ridicule alone can touch them. But the women who give themselves up to open indulgences, and open disregard of character, are not those whose example is mischievous, and who corrupt society. The poison is spread by those who wear the veil of delicacy, propriety, tenderness, affection, beauty, and all the charms of female loveliness. It is thus that the most dangerous corruption works under the mask of the most affecting virtue. Nothing less than the touch of the magical spear of ridicule can pierce this spell.

Ridicule is like the light of the morning on that which appeared beautiful under the shadowing beams of the moon, but which cannot bear the stronger rays of the sun. The delusive charm vanishes, and the spots come forth in their ugliness; the hope of deception expires, — and the consciousness that the artifices are known, takes away the ability to continue them.

The charge of immorality in the poet's ridicule must be founded on an assumption contrary to this: — an assumption that the vice ridiculed is rendered attractive, or not an object of shame, by descriptions connected with so much loveliness: but irony, if very acute, is a resistless weapon, which dissolves the intenseness of grave and enthusiastic passion, and disarms the fury which grows stronger by direct and equal resistance.

Poems might be named, which have all the mischief attributed to these de-

scriptions of Lord Byron, but cannot pretend to any of these merits; which struggle to render more attractive those sentimental flowers under which vice is veiled, instead of exposing them; which leave the poison in full force, but produce nothing of the antidote; in which all the artifices of poetical ornament are expended to give to sensual enjoyments the outward character of amiable tenderness, — instead of calling forth ridicule to set before them the guard of shame.

LETTER XXIV.

June 15.

THEY who have not paid attention to the effects of perseverance and practice on native ability, in any branch of intellectual pursuits, can have no conception of the increased power which, in the lapse of a short time, is attained by gradual and imperceptible advances. What was at first dark clears up; confusion settles into order; perplexities untie themselves; and the lines which could not be traced become distinct, decided, and prominent. Confidence of strength, skill, experience, render untrod paths as easy as those which are beaten; and what is new is managed with as much ease as what is already formed and trite.

I have limited these effects to *native ability*, because the perseverance in study,

by those who are born without talent, often only overloads the mind; and by those who are superficial, makes a memory, already too officious, still more delusive to themselves, and wearisome to others.

Native ability, and still more, native genius, has always an impulse to think for itself, and to judge by its own observation and feelings. But when it commences to develope its internal movements, and to reduce into shape and form the ideas which yet only show themselves by glimpses, the task is found difficult, and the weak and unsuccessful effort produces discouragement. A sensitive and timid mind sometimes quits the field in despair, after the first attempt; — others are afraid to leave the shore; will not surrender the guiding-rope by which they can be directed, — and abandon their own ideas for those already prepared for them.

Even vigorous and bold genius has

sometimes begun in this diffident manner. When there is a capacity of deep and intense thought, the intellect is not always as ready as it is deep, but requires a longer time to perform its functions. That which is only fit to skim the surface soon arrives at the extent of its strength.

These positions seem to me to have been strikingly illustrated by the progress of Lord Byron's genius. His earliest productions had clearly very little originality, nor were they characterised by *force*, — not even *borrowed* force. What is singular, the merit which the best of his juvenile poems approached was ease, elegance, and gentleness.

Here, then, was an *assumed* character of poetry, by one whose practical character at the very moment, and whose future compositions, evinced a most extraordinary force of native genius. This could only have arisen from want of confidence in his own resources; from fear to trust

himself in the management of his own ideas; or from actual inability, at this early stage, to digest and express them.

In the *first* and *second* cantos of his *Childe Harold*, he began to deal very liberally with those images and sentiments which were more congenial with his own; but still he used much of the tone and very words of others.

As soon as he had gained the applause of the public, and thus confirmed himself in a due estimate of his own strength, he commenced to deal with his own ideas in his own words; but even then he did not do it at once. He broke out in powerful, splendid, and original passages, in which the very extraordinary shapes and colours of his imagination were clothed in congenial and equally unborrowed language. Yet it required long practice and perseverance before these efforts could be sustained through a composition of any length. Even

Lord Byron's genius was not equal to master and express at once so many new and powerful expressions and reflections as now crowded on his very fertile and splendid brain.

Had he haunted more beaten paths, and dwelt more on prospects with which the common eye is conversant, his task would have been much easier; all the parts of his descriptions would have been prepared for him, the lines drawn, the details traced, the tints disposed. But the subjects he chose were new in all their parts; dark, massy, unbroken, unpierced! The vigour of his penetrating eye grew every day more energetic and expansive; —the masses retired before him, — the clouds dispersed, and the sun of his genius at length dispelled the thickest vapours at once, and threw broad light into whatever quarter he chose to direct its rays.

Perhaps there is not much genius or

merit in that singularity and novelty of invention which cannot carry along with it the reader; who, instead of accompanying, gazes after its devious excursions with distant wonder.

Lord Byron, on the contrary, bears with him the yielding, overwhelmed, and astonished reader into the thickest of the gloomy and tremendous forests of direful enchantment into which human footsteps had never yet entered:—the spell is pronounced, the witch-song is sung;—the reader listens, trembles, admires, dreads, condemns;—in vain he would be exorcised:—he purifies himself with holy water;—the spell is repeated;—again he enters, and listens, and trembles, and prays for liberation,—yet admires again!

A mighty genius, thus, by perseverance and confidence, in possession of its full powers, opens with every new day new worlds of enchantment, that embody themselves as easily as those on which

art has for ages been at work, and which have lost their freshness and their charms in proportion to the increase of their polish.

LETTER XXV.

June 16.

I CANNOT but be reminded in society of the opinions of a large mass of mankind who deem poetry a mere trifling amusement, fit only for women and boys, and think the merits of one who has done no more than write what *they* call *empty verses* not worth the trouble of much consideration or many words.

We are at too late a period of literature to render the defence of poetry necessary, not merely as a source of refined pleasure, but as an important and most elevated branch of moral knowledge;—the only question is, what are Lord Byron's claims to excellence in this art?

Notwithstanding all which has been said as his advocate in these letters, much

rational doubt will still remain with a large portion of sound minds, whether the charge of *immoral* tendency in his poems is not too well founded. The defence made for him will be deemed by many too subtle; and the supposed effects by which his descriptions and his poignant ridicule have been attempted to be justified will be deemed too uncertain, too remote, and too dependent on reflection and reasoning, to be looked for from the hasty and superficial minds of the mass of the public.

I admit it to be a *question;* but I am not convinced by this *answer* to the defence. I do not like to rely on far-fetched and abstruse defences; but still I think that *that* which is here suggested has a firm root. *This* is not the *first* impression which Lord Byron's poems convey, even to the most profound reader: but first impressions are not always the true.

I will not here trouble myself to go re-

gularly through such of the grand doctrines of religion and morals as Lord Byron's poems are supposed to have a constant tendency to outrage; all of them have been urged over and over again by his adversaries; and some of them by candid and friendly criticism. On the first subject it would be idle not to abandon his defence. His attacks on our religious faith are too positive and too revolting to be palliated.

There are *parts* of his writings which must be equally given up on *moral* grounds. Some of his *personal* attacks are malignant, low, and mean, and could only have sprung from base and ungenerous passions; while some of his praises are as fulsome and unfounded as his censures! It could be easily shown that he has bitterly, foully, and unprovokedly attacked some whom he in his heart admired, whom he studied intently, whose spirit he endeavoured to catch, and to

whom he was indebted for many noble thoughts, and some powerful language! It is useless, — and worse than useless, — it is injurious, — to attempt to defend what is utterly indefensible. It is better to abandon it; to surrender it to its fate; to cover it with its proper opprobrium; and to lament the mingled blots and corruptions of a noble nature!

There are other blots of a similar cast for which I can find no excuse. Is it not unmanly to insult the ashes of the dead, who have fallen victims to the greatest misfortune, the most lamentable disease, to which poor humanity is subject? And all this from *political*, not personal, antipathy! Are *political* antipathies to breed *personal* hatred, which shall insult the grave?—The grave, too, of the most gentlemanly, the mildest-mannered, the boldest-hearted man in Europe. These are traits, which, whenever I would feel admiration for the genius and the poetry of Lord

Byron, I am necessitated to efface from my recollection. To *me* no words of reprobation appear too strong for such an exhibition of horrible blackness of feeling!

The heart for a moment sinks in despondency to behold in frail human nature the union of such frightful darkness with so much gigantic splendour!

I must escape from this painful discussion to more congenial enquiries. It is a *grave* charge, if it be true, that Lord Byron has employed his brilliant imagination to render vice attractive in the shape of female beauty. If it be true, it is more true in his *serious* than in his *comic* poems; to which last this censure has been more especially directed. There is exquisite intensity of force, and grace, and brilliancy, in both. So much subtle and pointed irony, so much arch humour, so much surprising knowledge of the most secret and evanescent movements of the

human heart, were never before united with such a grave, dreaming, sombre, visionary, enthusiastic imagination! Never before were smiles and tears, and comic wit and rapturous passion, so blended! In the same cup of inspiration there is, as I contend, all the joy of delirious inebriety, and all the rational safety of comic self-possession!

LETTER XXVI.

June 17.

NOTWITHSTANDING the consolations to be derived from poetry and the imaginative faculty, there are some anxieties and sorrows of life over which it has little power. I am aware that the exception will appear affected and ridiculous to many; but, in defiance of their scepticism, I avow it to be true. The delusions of poetical invention may soften our own *personal* and *selfish* pains either of mind or body; but they cannot have any control over our *sympathy* for the *actual* sufferings of others, for whom we are interested, when we see them in *positive* operation. We know our own power of self-escape from our own pains, because the beams of imagination which encircle us are visible to our own eyes; but we know not that

those whom we see under the rod of affliction, and whose sufferings agitate us, are gifted with the same balm. To *them* the woes and pangs of life may appear in all their unqualified nakedness and force. They may have no escape from poverty, and dereliction, and insult, and bodily disease, in the resources of the mind.

In the course of a stormy, perilous, and disappointed life, I have been accustomed to forget myself, or to exhilarate my spirits, by the aid of the transforming magic of imagination. But whenever I have been inclined to call it in to enable me to liberate myself from the suffering for the sorrows of others, I have felt a sting and warning of conscience that I was *abusing* its power.

Here, then, the charms of poetry must lose their efficacy: they may even become a delusion, of which the indulgence may border upon immorality; because

they may tend to weaken those *sympathetic* feelings which are a primary virtue.

My heart aches, and my spirits fail, when my reason and my duty impose upon me any check to the indulgence, any limits to the utility and delight, of those high endowments out of which poetry springs. It is a grave charge to be listening to the music and the eloquence of imaginative joy, while our fellow-beings are groaning around us under the infliction of positive and actual misery.

We must not harden our hearts; yet we must not cultivate this anxiety *too far*. In this frail state of existence we cannot have unmingled good: in much encouragement of the sorrow for which there is too frequent cause in the daily occurrences of life we enfeeble our energies of heart and intellect, till we can no longer do the qualified good which would otherwise be in our power.

Gray, in his *Progress of Poesy*, has

assigned to the MUSE the task of soothing the intensity of human sorrows. He says, in a *note* to the first stanza of his second ternary, " To compensate the real or ima- " ginary ills of life, the Muse was given " to mankind by the same Providence that " sends the day by its cheerful presence " to dispel the gloom and terrors of the " night." Gray, therefore, seems to justify the use of the cup of Helicon as a charm which may give us oblivion of our woes.

The principle of voluntary anxiety or pain, that we may be kept wakeful to the miseries of humanity, seems a very superstitious, or at least doubtful, creed. In this clouded and tempestuous world we are more likely to be hardened by melancholy and despair than by the luxury of enjoyment.

Whatever softens and refines the heart increases the nicety and purity of its sensitiveness: it teaches us to notice

and appreciate those delicate sources of internal pleasure or pain in the bosoms of others, which the rude understanding, conversant only with outward and material experiences, insults, outrages, and tortures. To proscribe poetry, as an indulgence which extinguishes or diminishes our moral sympathy, is rigid, harsh, and, for the most part, even unreasonable and unjust.

It *may* be abused. What may *not* be abused? But the abuse will be so rare, and so improbable, — while the use is so exquisite, so dignified, and so general, — that it would argue but little wisdom to let an objection so subtle, and of such rare occurrence, prevail.

There is an inclination in mankind to exact of poets a little more than frail humanity can perform. They are called upon to imagine all that is tender, magnificent, and beautiful; to lose themselves in visions of a purer existence; to

let nothing vulgar, nothing of the harshness of real life, touch them, or cross their thoughts, lest it should intermingle a stain in their inventions; yet when practical life chooses to make a demand upon them, their nature is in an instant to be changed; the ethereal mantle is to be thrown off; the feelings are to be hardened to a rougher atmosphere; the frames and nerves to be robust and weather-cased; and the limbs strengthened to contend in labour with those who have been accustomed from infancy to hew wood and dig the soil!

He who is urged to lift himself into the air, and ride upon the wings of the winds, cannot, at the very moment when caprice or even reason demands, stop his career, descend to earth, and re-assume the grovelling vocations of common beings.

Genius is sometimes whimsical, and sometimes gives immoderate indulgence to its eccentricities. An attention to the

history of mankind, and the lessons of biography, ought to impress on it a warning against these excesses. The world will not spare them ; nor will the severity and malignity of criticism spare them. The fondness of panegyric, the blindness of praise, is transient : ingenuity soon begins to delight itself in distinguishing spots, and bringing faults into prominence.

There is, then, but little encouragement to genius to abuse its power. Too much is expected of it, — rather than licence, — in return for its merits. All opposite virtues are required ; and the caution and prudence of cold calculation are expected to be united with the warmth of generous enterprise. It would be as reasonable to demand the creative imagination of *Milton* or *Shakspeare* to be joined to the dry scientific genius of *Newton*.

I do not say that all Lord Byron's eccentricities were venial : some were naturally connected with the character of

his genius; others were too much the humours of a violent and unrestrained temper. Where we cannot *excuse*, we must *pity* and *forgive;* and never forget those splendid beauties by which they were in some degree redeemed.

LETTER XXVII.

June 18.

THE *Pleasures of Imagination* have been explained and justified by *Addison* in prose, and by *Akenside* in verse: but there are moments of real life when its miseries and its necessities seem to overpower and destroy them. The history of mankind, however, furnishes proofs that no bodily suffering, no adverse circumstances, operating on our material nature, will extinguish the spirit of imagination.

Perhaps there is no instance of this so very affecting and so very sublime as the case of *Tasso*. They who have seen the dark, horror-striking dungeon-hole at *Ferrara*, in which he was confined seven years under the imputation of madness, will have had this truth impressed upon

their hearts in a manner never to be erased. In this vault, of which the sight makes the hardest heart shudder, the poet employed himself in finishing and correcting his immortal *epic* poem.

Lord Byron's *Lament* on this subject is as sublime and profound a lesson in morality, and in the pictures of the recesses of the human soul, as it is a production most eloquent, most pathetic, most vigorous, and most elevating, among the gifts of the Muse! The bosom which is not touched with it, the fancy which is not warmed, the understanding which is not enlightened and exalted by it, is not fit for human intercourse. If Lord Byron had written nothing but this, to deny him the praise of a *grand poet* would have been flagrant injustice or gross stupidity.

There are instances of the cruelty of mankind to each other, which are so inexpressibly frightful as to surpass belief,

were not the historical evidence of them indisputable. There was, I think, a *Prince of Milan*, some centuries ago, who, in those contentious times, having been taken prisoner by the opposite party, was suspended in the air from some high building in a cage, like a wild beast, and left to perish in that state. Could imagination visit and cheer this victim? Yet if *Tasso* could be cheered in his forlorn condition, even this was possible.

Imagination is as much a part of our nature as the limbs with which we are formed and the breath we draw. The degree and quality of it is partly a gift, and partly the effect of culture. Man is answerable *morally* for the manner in which he uses this endowment. It is the mediator between our fallen condition and that higher state of existence to which all great and good minds are destined to aspire. It is only in imagin-

ation that our nobler hopes and desires can yet be gratified.

But because it is only imaginative, the stupid and the foolish call it *empty ;* as if the visions of the mind had not pleasures and virtues as positive and intense as those of the senses.

There are so many unhappy situations in this chequered life, so many beings involved in adverse circumstances, that the riches of the mind alone are their only prop and solace ; and I always read with an extreme glow of delight *Lovelace*'s most exquisite song from his prison, in which he says,

" My mind to me a kingdom is !"

It is true that the imagination is a good or an evil power, according to the manner in which we worship her, and the dispensations which we ask of her : — she gives fire to light the altar of glory, or the pile of shame and destruction.

There were moments, unluckily, when Lord Byron invoked her flames to the poisonous fuel which, among nobler stores, he had admitted into his heart..

The dangers of imagination lie in a total departure from the control of reason, and the tests of actual life. For the sobriety of wisdom, for that preservation of *verisimility* which is absolutely essential to a sound imagination, a perpetual reference to *man as he is*, and to the scenery and existences of the material world, is indispensable. Mere undisciplined imagination, which pays no attention to probability, and creates without any regard to the laws and principles of nature, is insanity. If it be applied to composition, it teaches us nothing ; it only raises silly and ignorant wonder, and ends in emptiness and disgust.

But true, sound imagination teaches us more knowledge of our being, compounded as it is of mind and matter, more deep

moral wisdom, than mere unassisted reason, or poring observation, can do; because it carries its piercing light into the *penetralia* of the bosom, into which the outward eye cannot enter; and furnishes *data* which the reason may use, but cannot discover.

Why is a well-written tale of *fiction* of more profound and passionate interest than a *biographical* or *historical* narrative? Because it penetrates where the relater of mere facts cannot penetrate; because it tells all the feelings and secret thoughts of the characters represented; because it does not confine itself to actions or expressed opinions, but discovers hopes, fears, motives, ends, secret affections and dislikes, passing passions, not only unrealised, but which end in air as quick as they came, and momentary views unrecorded, unremembered, unnoticed, in actual life. If these are told of an individual who has really existed, our in-

credulity destroys our pleasure in the relation: we ask ourselves how they could be known to the relater; and if we suspect that he invents when he ought merely to record, we are disgusted with his want of veracity.

It is far otherwise when an author comes forward as the relater of his own inventions. Then we try his tale by its probabilities; by its nature; by its intrinsic interest; by its eloquence, its pathos, its knowledge of the general character of mankind; by its moral wisdom, the beauty of its scenery, and the force of its conceptions, and the animation of its portraits. Such an author deals with his proper subjects when he paints the internal movements of the human heart, because his sources lie in the imagination; and it is the imagination only to which these are known. The test of the power and virtue of that ima-

gination lies in the degree of *sympathy* which it awakens; while that sympathy much depends on the faculty of *verisimility*.

LETTER XXVIII.

June 19.

It may be difficult to assign a satisfactory reason, but it is surely a fact, that WIT almost always appears *heartless*. I take Johnson's *definition* of wit*, that it is "a kind of *discordia concors*; a combin- "ation of dissimilar images, or discovery "of occult resemblances, in things ap- "parently unlike." It is this *discordia* which is, probably, the cause that it is *heartless*. The heart has no sympathy but with what is natural. We admire *wit*, but we do not love and trust it: we have no confidence in it, because there is nothing in our own bosoms which is *intimate* with it, and because, therefore, we have no guide to enable us to guess what will be its next movement. A man of wit will sacrifice any thing to his jest.

* Life of Cowley.

For this reason a man of wit has scarce ever appeared to be an enthusiast. *Burke* was, I think, an exception: Burke was, perhaps, the only person of this class of genius, whose wit was always grave and serious; no one's wit, therefore, was always so truly poetical as Burke's. The purpose of Burke's wit was *illustration*, not ridicule.

Ridicule produces a feeling not congenial with those feelings which it is the end of the best poetry to awaken. Ridicule begets contempt for the object on which it is thrown, whereas it is the noblest and highest purpose of poetry to make us admire or love what is represented. Contempt is a chilling, ungenerous passion, and less poetical even than hatred, because hatred is at least energetic.

Humour does not deal so much in ridicule: there is oftener much gravity in humour.

Lord Byron had both wit and humour; and it seems to me, notwithstanding a few instances may be found which may seem to contradict me, that these qualities had in him more of gravity and earnestness than of ridicule and laughter; and I think that, notwithstanding all his affected gaiety, we can discover that the same sombre and deep emotions as belong to his more serious poetry, give rise to the colours of scorn or absurdity in which he paints his comic subjects. To *me* this is an attraction, not a fault; it rouses sympathy, not fear and distrust. It is strange that there are some who confound *naïveté* with wit; it is, of course, the very opposite. A great deal of Lord Byron's comic poetry pleases from its *naïveté;* from the frank and fearless sincerity and artlessness with which it describes some of the follies of temporary manners, and records the phraseology of the silly fashions of the day. It is a

laugh; but the poet "laughs the heart's "laugh:" still, not as if the comic was his original and predominant talent, Lord Byron, in these poems of humour, has a great deal which would not have been borne but from one of established reputation, and would not have been attempted by any other.

The ridicule which arises from *fidelity of description* is quite different from that which arises from *wit*, and it is different not only in its causes but in its effects. It does not equally freeze and dry up the spring of action in the mind of the reader, for the ill consequences are left with those whose absurdities are thus represented. I mean, that it produces more pity than scorn in the reader.

Satire has always been a legitimate function of poetry: but this function has always been considered a subordinate department of it, because it is less dignified and less generous to awaken dis-

like than admiration. But satire need not necessarily use the weapon of ridicule. I have said in a former letter that ridicule is the most irresistible of all the weapons of attack; I do not mean to recede from that assertion: but, because it is irresistible, I do not think it should be used; at least the ridicule of wit should not be used, where milder instruments will effect a cure: it is a cruel and venomous remedy; and the disease ought to be very intense and very malignant to which it should be applied.

These are, indeed, very nice and subtle distinctions, and I do not expect to find a general concurrence in them: it will be well, if I obtain the concurrence even of a few readers. It may be said that Lord Byron's ridicule depends as much on the *discordia concors* as that of any other witty composition; and it would require a very minute scrutiny of his comic poems to decide this point with perfectly weighed

accuracy. An analysis of an adequate variety of his striking passages would be requisite, and this I have not at the present moment either leisure or inclination to do.

Lord Byron is vehement, copious, rich, and expansive, rather than self-collected, dry, caustic, and heartlessly witty. His images are never a mere effort of the *head:* there is always something of sensibility or emotion in them, whether it be kind or unamiable, moral or immoral. I do not doubt that the view in which he represents things is a view in which he himself saw them at the moment. But wit is commonly artifice: it is a factitious combination for the sake of exciting wonder or contempt; except it be, as I have already said, for the pure purpose of *illustration*, which, when the *concordance* of the *discord* is not only apt, but when each part is beautiful in itself, is not mere wit, but most exquisite poetry:

such as when Burke, speaking of *Croft*'s imitation of *Johnson*'s style, said, " It had " all the contortions of the sybil without " the inspiration !"

The comic effect which is produced by the fidelity of natural description depends upon a very different talent from *wit:* it depends upon the selection of comic features; not upon novelty of combination, but upon happiness of minute notice; upon an eye accustomed to detect improprieties and absurdities, and a feeling more awake to censure than to praise. To afford a subject for this talent, the impropriety or absurdity must actually exist: but it is not so with *wit;* wit can make any thing ridiculous, which is not intrinsically so, because it *creates* the combination to which the ridicule attaches. Wit, therefore, commonly wants principle and integrity, as well as heart; even if these wants are not necessarily included in *heartlessness.*

After all, *Don Juan*, the principal comic production of Lord Byron, is a very strange medley. It has all sorts of faults, many of which cannot be defended, and some of which are disgusting; but it has, also, almost every sort of poetical merit: there are in it some of the finest passages which Lord Byron ever wrote; there is amazing knowledge of human nature in it; there is exquisite humour; there is freedom, and bound, and vigour of narrative, imagery, sentiment, and style, which are admirable; there is a vast fertility of deep, extensive, and original thought; and, at the same time, there is the profusion of a prompt and most richly-stored memory. The invention is lively and poetical; the descriptions are brilliant and glowing, yet not over-wrought, but fresh from nature, and faithful to her colours; and the prevalent character of the whole, (bating too many dark spots,) not dispi-

riting, though gloomy; not misanthropic, though bitter; and not repulsive to the visions of poetical enthusiasm, though indignant and resentful.

LETTER XXIX.

June 20.

I HAVE not noticed the dramas of Lord Byron. They are admitted to be unfit for the stage; but they contain numerous poetical passages of great force and beauty. There is another extraordinary poem of which I have not spoken hitherto; because, I will confess, that I know not how to speak of it properly, yet something must be said of it. — *Cain* is a poem much too striking to be passed in silence. But its impiety is so frightful that it is impossible to praise it, while its genius and beauty of composition would demand all the notice which mere literary merit can claim. It is scarcely necessary to repeat the answer to the very futile defence which has been made for it, against the charge of its attack on

the goodness of Providence. It must be obvious to every intelligent reader that the example of *Milton* does not apply to the manner in which Lord Byron has executed his poem of *Cain*. Milton puts rebellious and blasphemous speeches into the mouth of *Satan;* but Milton never leaves those speeches unanswered: on the contrary, he always brings forward a *good angel* to controvert triumphantly all the daring assertions and arguments of the EVIL SPIRIT. Lord Byron leaves all which he ascribes to *Cain* and *Lucifer* in their full force on the reader's mind, without even an attempt to repel them.

It seems to me, that of all Lord Byron's poems this is that of which the ill tendency is most unequivocal, and for which no plausible excuse can be made;—and it is the more dangerous, because it is one of the best written.

And now I am come to a summary of Lord Byron's character as a poet; —and how is it possible for me to pronounce

but one judgment? I take the definition of poetry to be but *one;* to be simple and indisputable; and by that must the decision be pronounced.

That Lord Byron has *imaginative invention* is proved by his *Manfred*, his *Corsair*, *Lara*, *Sardanapalus*, &c., and even by his *Don Juan;* and that these fictions possess another primary essential, may, I think, be fairly asserted: — this is *verisimility*, — if the meaning of that word be taken in its enlarged and liberal sense. Only two requisites remain: — the quality of these inventions must be *sublime*, or *pathetic*, or *beautiful;* and the quality of the language must be *congenial* to that of the design and feigned circumstances in imagery, force, tenderness, elegance, and harmony. Has Lord Byron fulfilled these demands, or has he not? I cannot suppose that this question is open except to *one* answer; and I assert that that answer must be in the *affirmative*.

Lord Byron, then, must be admitted to

be a great poet, because he has fulfilled all the requisites of high poetry. We are bound to try him, as we are bound to try every man of genius, by what he has done *well*, not by what he has done *ill*. Mighty powers do not exist the less, because they are not always exerted, or are sometimes abused.

No genius has taken a greater variety of characters than that of Lord Byron. Sometimes it is all splendour; sometimes it is all storm, and darkness, and diseased vapour; sometimes it is a surprising minglement of radiance and cloudiness, where the brilliancy at one moment emerges in broad unveiled effulgence, the next is utterly hidden, and then again just pierces and breaks in faint struggles and light golden spots through the billowy mantle. Such was this fiery and portentous *meteor;* or will he not rather be a *fixed star*, which will shine for ever in the heaven of poetry? The

flame of his imagination was fed by fuel that will make its light enduring, and that will cast forth an incense, of which the fragrance will not die!

His best poetry is composed of materials which have their sources in the heart and intellectual nature of man; I may add, in the *moral* nature of man, though the epithet may, at first, startle the reader when applied to Lord Byron. There are no poems, except *Shakspeare*'s, which have more life, more of human passions and interests, in them. They are too manly and vigorous to be ever fantastic; they are never once degraded by any of the petty artifices of poetry; they never offend the understanding, though they may sometimes outrage the conscience: they often flash some mighty truth upon us in the midst of tempestuous darkness; as in a stormy night, when all is massy and black, and the rolling thunder aggravates the horror,

beams of lightning open to us for a moment a glimpse of the mantled scenery around us.

Lord Byron, indeed, is the poet, not of imagination only, but especially of *intellect*, — I dare not say of *reason*. No person of common judgment will venture to deny, that his poems almost always afford food for thought, even for the severest mind. There are few poets (I scarcely know *four*) whose writings are not sometimes a little too delicate, too tender, too refined, to face the rude air of the world at large, and the coarse, common members of practical society; yet there is so much hardiness, and such a shield of strong defying sense in those of Lord Byron, that they can protect their own dignity in the midst of so rough and degrading a trial.

Vulgar and silly amateurs of poetry, or rather of what goes improperly under that name, are always talking of the

flowers of poetry. Lord Byron uniformly rejected and disdained these flowers. They are what make the great mass of poetical compositions disgusting to all men of solid sense and manly feeling; they are the false ornaments which turn it into a baby art. We do not want the load and disguise of gaudy language: we want the image, the sentiment, the thought itself. These frivolous searchers after dress care not for that which the dress covers.

It is the genuine poet's business *first* to discover abstract truths, and *then* to embody them by the faculty of imaginative invention. These *word-mongers* neither search for truths nor attempt "to "turn them into shape," and give life to them; but only direct their efforts to invest, in the clothing of new language, what is already invented, or what actually exists in palpable form before the senses; or, if they invent, it is something so

indistinct, so inconceivable, and so monstrous, that it may be suspected to be little else than a pretence for a set of mysterious and turgid words, which have more sound than meaning.

I can no where trace in Lord Byron the smallest appearance of factitious inspiration. He always wrote because his mind was full; or, at least, when he fixed on a subject, the fertility of his genius, intellect, and memory, supplied him instantly with unforced and unlaboured fulness. To whatever point his attention was directed, the rich and vivid stores of his fancy set all his mighty faculties and strong feelings into fervid operation. His sensibility, (not limiting that word to *tenderness*,) his constant temperament of strong emotion, always gave a strength and nature to all his intellectual acts. Nothing was weak, equivocal, affected, or the result of accidental or unintelligible associations. Many of his

feelings and notions were peculiar; but they were the peculiarity of nature, not of habit and artifice. They had too much life, and freshness, and force, to be assumed.

All can understand in *painting* the difference between a picture copied from *individual* and *particular* nature, and that which is a design *created* by the artist, and represents nature by an imagined composition. All know, that if it be the work of a just invention and true genius, the *latter* conveys the most true and lively representation of *general* nature. This is distinctly conceived in painting, because it is addressed to the senses, — *oculis subjecta fidelibus :* — but in poetry, to which it is still more strictly and forcibly applicable, it is comprehended much less clearly and less universally.

This sort of fiction is the soul of poetry; but it is a talent, of which *all* the requisites united are so extraordinarily

rare, that in all Europe, in six centuries, the number of those who have exhibited it in a legitimate manner, and in any very powerful degree, is so small, that I dare not specify it without seeming invidious. Life, force, nature, truth, sublimity, pathos, beauty, interest of fable, happy and probable combination of incidents, expression, harmony, — all these must be joined! And who can dare to aspire to such an assemblage? When it does occur, what is there that can equal its fruits, either in delight or in utility? In no other way can the most precious of mere human wisdom, the wisdom which lies in the knowledge of man's moral and intellectual nature, be conveyed with so much brilliancy and strength of impression.

I must not presume to say, that Lord Byron has entirely fulfilled all these high essentials of mighty genius duly exerted. I fear, or rather hope, that he has some-

times failed in the grandest essential, — truth itself: for to believe that all his representations, and the conclusions resulting from all his fictions, are true; and that he has never embodied falsehood instead of truth, would be to admit what would corrupt our hearts, by filling them with discontent and despondency.

But whatever he has embodied he has embodied with every other essential faculty of a poet, whether it be truth or falsehood! And surely he has sometimes embodied truth herself in radiant and enchanting colours; while falsehood has, by the spell of his genius, taken so much of the shape and features of truth, that, though it is on that very account the more dangerous, it does not diminish the brilliancy of his power, though it stains the purity of his conscience.

In thus having dwelt for nine-and-twenty days on the same subject, I am

not sure that I have not worked myself into a temperament, on which the heat of my imagination may have overcome the sobriety of my judgment.

LETTER XXX.

July 3.

I HAVE allowed an interval of thirteen days to pass since my last letter, that if my judgment had become heated, it might have time to calm. The result is that I see no reason to change my opinions. I have since conversed intimately with a gentleman who, at a late period of Lord Byron's life, spent many of his days with him: I have hitherto learned nothing to contradict my ideas, and much to confirm them; nay, my ideas of the great poet have been even raised; and some conjectural apologies I have made for him have been proved to be well-founded.

To presume to speak of the characters of persons whom we have not known personally seems to many minds too baseless an attempt. But sometimes we

see more perfectly at a distance, than when we are very near. There are *intrinsic* marks, communicable by writing or conversation, which scarcely ever deceive; while they who have actual and repeated interviews, may behold only the surface of another's character, his petty manners, his little inconsiderate flashes of temper or of thought, the trivial ebullitions of his passing vanity, or hear those imperfect expressions of indigested idea or sentiment, which the irritation of society is too apt to produce in sensitive and uncalm spirits. I have known men who have always shown the worst of themselves in company, and have been only good and wise in the closet, where their irritability subsided, and all was calmness, benevolence, deep consideration for others, and sound unerring judgment. Whatever value, therefore, we may put on anecdotes, and what is called *personal knowledge*, as the only intelligence

to be relied on, and the corrector of fanciful speculations and empty guesses, solid thinkers feel assured that they must always be received with caution, and that much depends on the sort of capacity for observation with which the relater is endowed. I have had the advantage of trying my speculative opinions on Lord Byron by the test of the personal intimacy of one, whose qualifications to observe with soundness and comprehension have appeared to me quite indisputable. I have always thought, that *Horace Walpole* (*Lord Orford*), witty and ingenious as he was, relied too much on *little* anecdotes to pourtray and pull down great characters. And long-memoried but light-minded *Anthony Wood*, in his silly attempt to disparage Lord Clarendon, is to me an apt illustration of my theory.

An author may have as much simulation in his writings as in his manners; but a sagacious reader can always detect

the falsity, especially if the author writes much, and at different times. — Common observers, common readers, and common critics, cannot distinguish between those changes and contradictions to which every rich mind is subject, and those which are the indexes of deceit and hollow pretension. There is no insincerity in being sometimes gay, jocose, fond of actual life, and of "the paths "of observance," and sometimes solitary, contemplative, visionary, and profoundly melancholy. Of all the admirable qualities possessed by Lord Byron, this alternation of powers and humours, this change

"From grave to gay, from lively to severe,"

is among the most attractive. It follows the character of our nature, — and each successively delights doubly by the contrast. But how he got such an intimate knowledge of "many-coloured" life; how

he could see all its petty details, all its trifling absurdities, with such a microscopic eye; how he could treasure up in his grand memory, — in a memory filled with such sublime and gigantic images, —such a copiousness of humorous vulgarisms, (and I am afraid I must add, of *very slang*,) is to me among the numerous inconceivable incidents of his inimitable gifts of genius. It would not, indeed, be so wonderful, if we did not compare it with the history of his life. But how small were his opportunities in *these* walks of *observance!* After leaving college, he spent scarcely more than *three* years in England, and of that how little could have been spent in *mixed* society!

When my friend's *Anecdotes* and *Records of the Conversation* of this extraordinary man shall appear, (as I trust they soon will,) it will be seen how much he shunned mixed society abroad, and how little it could ever have been to his taste

in England. As to his occasional severity and bitterness; his anger and indignation at the common characters which are cherished, and cockered, and bepraised by the world; he had good reason for his discontents and his resentments. He had seen enough of their treacheries, their artifices, their hypocrisies, and their outrages of integrity. "Do and think "what you will, — but wear a mask!" is the maxim of the world. Lord Byron's was the direct reverse: "Wear not a "mask, whatever you may do or think! "I hate a mask: it turns a venial offence "into an odious and irredeemable crime." Such, at least, appears to me to have been a ruling impression of his mental and moral character, — the united result of sentiment and intellect! I will not say that it may not be abused; but it is surely much less mischievous, and much more noble, than the contrary.

The various ways in which a preference of what is plausible to what is true operates to corrupt, and finally to destroy, society, it would take a volume to describe. Perhaps every thing which is thought and done ought not to be told; but nothing ought to be told which is not thought or done. Many persons can reason speciously in favour of opinions which they do not hold. — We do want reasonings only; we want an author's convictions. There are often ingredients that form part of the materials on which conviction is built; but which yet are so subtle as to elude the power of expression. And on this account, I contend that we want more than reasonings, and desire to have the results to which he, who undertakes to instruct us, has himself come. To free men of ordinary talents from timidity and restraint in laying open their mental movements, feelings, and opinions, may produce no

good: but minds of strong and fertile genius thus emancipated are fountains of knowledge, sympathy, and delight. Splendid as were Lord Byron's faculties, it is this which forms one of their greatest charms. He wanted no veiling; (I speak generally; — every thing is liable to exceptions;) — he wanted no veiling; the more clearly and less disguisedly he was seen, the more rich and magnificent he appeared.

His powers grew to the last: — the two last cantos of *Don Juan* (xv, xvi.) were perhaps the best written of any of that poem, — though his incidents might have been supposed to have been exhausted, and his subject worn out! I am astonished at his ease, his point, his humour, his freshness, the admirable sagacity of his understanding, his intimate insight into the diversities of the human character, the keenness with which he dissects, the brilliancy with which he

discovers, the smiles and good humour with which he delineates and exposes, and the irresistible fidelity and truth with which he marks out the features of his innumerable *personæ dramatis*. Here all is comic without extravagance; and ridiculous without anger or scorn. Nor is there a single hereditary subject of satire; no transmitted images; no hackneyed formularies of contempt or indignation; no borrowed portraits; no obsolete absurdities; — all comes new and direct from life; and this poem, perhaps, affords a greater novelty, as well as freedom, in the combination of words, than can elsewhere be found: with such an extraordinary lucidness; such a prevalence of the thought over the language; and such an utter rejection of all artifice and common-place ornament, as to hold the attention, and carry forward the reader by an inexhaustible charm.

There is a sort of genius so abstract and remote, that though we admire its spirituality, we have not an entire and intimate sympathy with it, because it seems out of our reach: — too good for us, or too lofty for us! We never for a moment forget that Lord Byron is a fellow-being, — even in the midst of his most sublime and romantic flights of poetry. Frail humanity attends him; and if his faults do not make us love him, at least his weaknesses and sorrows engage our affections.

There is something so manly in his most tender and most exquisite feelings, of so vigorous and healthy a hue, so consistent with a noble daring, so prepared for perils, so strung for action, so adventurous, rather than subject to that shrinking imbecility of action which is the disease that too commonly besets genius, that he seems our protector

rather than a sensitive being (as poets generally are) demanding our protection!

Were not Lord Byron's endowments of the intrinsic merit which belongs to them, yet their extreme rarity, at least, in union, ought alone to secure not only our wonder but our esteem. He stands alone in our poetical biography, unlike all other poets in his endowments, his literary boldness and ease, his personal habits, the extraordinary incidents of his adventurous life, the novelty of his poetical career, and the splendour of his original imagination. I have said *our* poetical biography, — I ought to have said the poetical biography of *Europe*.

He had his glories while alive; but he had also his deep mortifications and insults, even in his poetical character. He was sometimes criticised in the most foul and treacherous manner; and it will hereafter be proved that some of

the charges of bitterness and gross abuse which have been heaped most heavily on his name were justly provoked by *outrageous aggression.*

LETTER XXXI.

July 4.

SINCE it has been finally resolved to print these Letters, a little retrospect and more precise guard of some of the opinions expressed in them becomes prudent. Lord Byron, when alive, kept his numerous enemies intimidated and checked by the powerful ascendancy of his genius; now that he is gone, many of them will come forth again in their venom, with their cowardly aggressions on his memory; and there will be an endeavour to sacrifice to their malignity and resentment those who take his part.

It is well known that the points of attack on Lord Byron have been for some years directed, not against his genius, but against his morals and personal character. An apologist on this head

ought to be very explicit, both for Lord Byron's sake and for his own. Were the reprobation and obloquy with which Lord Byron was pursued, from his entrance at Cambridge till his death, just or unjust? Had he not reason for complaint of the world's treatment? Had he cause for discontent and bitterness, or had he not? The common cry is, that he had not! — that he threw away genius, rank, station, the world's favour, — nay, the world's desire to receive him with open arms, in spite of errors and faults, — by defiance, outrage of all decorum, avoidance of society, foul satire, misanthropy, and the indulgence of all violent passions.

Such, at least, if not the general cry, has been the unqualified clamour of more than half his countrymen! If such charges were true it would be an odious task to be his apologist, even aided by all his dazzling genius. To me this view of

him seems not merely a gross caricature, but a most wicked falsehood. It is not necessary for me to rest my defence on the principle that we ought to limit our consideration to the merits or demerits of an author's writings, and have no concern with his private and personal character, except so far as it affects his writings; though a great deal might be urged for this principle, especially after an author's death. It seems to me that Lord Byron's personal character has been frightfully misrepresented and misunderstood.

There is in the world, very generally prevalent, a strange perversion of mind and heart, which forgives to young men who have *no redeeming* virtues or talents that, as the venial folly of early life, which is branded with infamy in *him* who has genius and a thousand brilliant qualities of heart, and a thousand brilliant actions, which ought to efface even great irregularities and faults. It would be well,

if genius could always bring with it all virtue, wisdom, prudence, complacency, and self-command,—if high sensibility, or susceptibility, was *always* impressible by *good*, and *never* by *evil;* — but such is not human nature; such is not the state in which Providence has sent us into the world! Lord Byron has been tried by rules not applied to others; not applicable to the qualities of our frail being; and, what is worse still, very often upon *assumed* and *invented* facts!

I will run rapidly over such of the generally-mentioned incidents of his life as I have every reason to believe cannot be contradicted, or, at least, not disproved. I pretend to no personal knowledge, nor to intelligence peculiar to myself.

It is said that at Cambridge Lord Byron endeavoured to distinguish himself by eccentricities unworthy a man endowed with talents which might command honourable fame. I admit the choice of a

bear as his companion, with all its attendant history, to have been a boyish act, which showed both bad taste and want of judgment. I do not doubt that Lord Byron had inherent in him, not only an excess of pride, but a good deal of vanity, which is not always united with it. The truth is, that there was implanted in him that strong *love of distinction*, which is given us for the wisest purposes, as a spur to noble exertions and a career of useful glory! But this fire does not always find vent in its proper direction; accidents sometimes impede it; blights, chills, obstructions, turn it aside; it is then almost sure, if it be strong, to break out in excrescences, funguses, diseases! Lord Byron had been oppressed and disappointed at school: he came to college with a wounded pride, and his manners, and (as I believe) the mortification of a fortune inadequate to his rank, exposed him to a reception there which

dwelt upon his haughty and meditative spirit, soured a temper naturally fierce, and drove his active feelings into extravagances in mere despair. This might be regretted; but there was nothing unnatural in it, nothing radically bad, nothing irredeemable, nothing unlike what has happened to thousands who have turned out virtuous and excellent members of society.

But mark how much of the noble flame of a cultivated, amiable, and splendid mind was working in him, in his better and more congenial hours, even *now*. At this crisis he wrote those poems which were published under the title of *Hours of Idleness!* And mark, too, how this effort of a grand spirit emerging from a cloud was met! — It was turned into the most offensive mockery and insult!! — The author of that mischievous article has been named to me, but I am not at liberty to repeat it. I do not think

it exaggeration to say, that much of the colour of the eccentric part of Lord Byron's future life is to be attributed to that article. Lord Byron, also, is said in his latter life to have known the author.

Lord Byron now went abroad; but not till he had taken vengeance of his critics, and gained an advantage which must in some degree have consoled him; but the wound still rankled:

— hæret lateri lethalis arundo!

The first two cantos of *Childe Harold* show that neither his understanding, his feelings, nor his genius, were allowed to sleep on his travels. Eccentricities, as strong as those exhibited at Cambridge, and produced by the same causes, may, perhaps, have been indulged during these wanderings; but it is clear, that they were never suffered to overlay his genius, or break down the energies of his mind or heart. I know not whether, if he did

not resist to join in the youthful follies by which the more common beings of his age, and rank, and sphere of life endeavour to render themselves remarkable, the flame which could still burn so brightly in the midst of such an enfeebling and extinguishing atmosphere, did not thus prove its vigour and its virtue more decidedly, than if carefully cultivated, and kept from all perils and counteractions. — It is a sickly flame which never makes the cauldron boil over, and cannot live amid winds and tempests, even at the expence of sometimes taking a wrong and dangerous direction.

At the age of twenty-four, after three years of absence, Lord Byron returned from his first travels. The publication of the first part of *Childe Harold* (1812) brought him into immediate fashion. But this sort of fashion, this quick pass from one extreme to another, is almost as dangerous and oversetting in

youth to a sensitive, fiery, and turbid spirit, as neglect and obloquy. It is like one used only to the bracing drink of cold waters suddenly overtaken by strong and inebriating wine! It must be recollected, that though in the democratic temper which prevails in England, Lord Byron's rank would not by itself procure him proper notice; yet when the whim of fashion fixed its eye on him on other accounts, it was a great aid, and increased fivefold the silly distinction which it confers with such blind adulation on its idols. I will not degrade my pen by attempting to give a picture of the manner in which it acts, or an examination of the little despicable cabals, artifices, intrigues, passions, and insanities, on these puny narrow stages of life, where the actors and actresses have the folly and blindness to call themselves *the world*, as if these few hundreds of silly people formed the exclu-

sively-important part of mankind! — nay, as if they *monopolized* title, birth, rank, wealth, polish, talent, and knowledge; and this at a crisis, when the ancient and great nobility keep themselves for the most part aloof; and when these *exclusionalists* are principally new titles, East Indians, adventurers, noisy politicians, impudent wits of low origin, vulgar emergers from the city suddenly got rich, contractors, Jews, rhyming orators, and scheming parsons, who have pushed themselves into notice by dint of open purse or brazen face; and who get a little bad gilding, like the ginger-bread of a rustic fair, by a few cast duchesses, countesses, &c., who having come to the end of their own pockets, credits, and characters, are willing to come wherever the doors of large houses can be opened to them, and the costs of expensive entertainments paid!

Into this new world, besetting to the young, the vain, and the inexperienced, Lord Byron was now plunged. It is true that his family was ancient, and had been highly allied, and might fairly be said to belong to the old nobility; — but I trust it will not be deemed invidious to say frankly, that they were now in their wane: — his father had lived in high life; but he died when the son was an infant, leaving the wreck of a spent fortune, and a widow to whose affairs retirement from the world became necessary, and who brought up her son among her own relations in Scotland, till the time when he was sent to *Harrow*.

There is nothing more illiberal than a *great school* on the subject of fortune, manners, and connections. When these operate to furnish mortification to a proud, sullen spirit, the chances are that it never recovers from its effects. Every one knows that the great passion of boys

assembled in large numbers is to mortify each other. I learned many years ago, from good intelligence, that Lord Byron was especially subjected to these effects. I think, therefore, that candour ought to make some allowance, if, under these circumstances, the sudden blaze of fashion that fell on Lord Byron had a sort of undue temporary influence over his strong mind, which it would not otherwise have had.

I say *temporary ;* — I shall presently show that he emancipated himself from it to a degree and in a manner which has been made an offensive charge against him, but which appears to *me* a proof of his radical magnanimity and rectitude.

But in the midst of this burst of fashionable idolatry his enemies and his traducers never left him. Not only were every error and indiscretion of his past life brought forward and made the theme of every tongue, but all were exaggerated ;

and there were added to them a thousand utter inventions of diabolical malignity. I had forgot to mention the old monk's skull, found at *Newstead*, which he had formed into a drinking cup, when he first quitted Cambridge for the old mansion of his ancestors, and the orgies of which among his young companions he made it a part. It must be confessed that it was an unfeeling frolic which it would be vain to excuse, and which, I must frankly own, fills me with a painful shudder that I cannot overcome. I am willing to surrender it to the opprobrium which it deserves. But his calumniators were not content with this ; they founded the most revolting perversions on it, which have found their way into the German and other foreign biographies of our poet. It cannot, however, but strike us, that many a youth of rank has been guilty of a hundred jokes equally objectionable, yet against whom such acts, if he hap-

pened to be stupid, and never to have done a good thing to counterbalance them, were never brought forward as objections to his amiableness or respectability.

Four eventful years (1812 to 1815) passed in this manner in England. It was on the 2d of January, 1815, that Lord Byron's marriage took place; — a subject on which it is not necessary to my purpose to enter into any details, and which I willingly avoid. All the world knows that it was not happy, and that, wherever the fault lay, it embittered the remainder of his days.

The charge against Lord Byron is, — not that he fell a victim to excessive temptations, and a combination of circumstances which it required a very rare and extraordinary degree of virtue, wisdom, prudence, and steadiness to surmount, — but that he abandoned a situation of uncommon advantages, and fell

weakly, pusillanimously, and selfishly, when victory would have been easy, and when defeat was ignominious. I have anticipated much of the answer to this charge: I will dwell a little more on it. I do not deny that Lord Byron inherited some very desirable and even enviable privileges in the lot of life which fell to his share. I should falsify my known sentiments if I treated lightly the gift of an ancient English peerage, and a name of honour and venerable antiquity: but without a fortune competent to that rank, it is not "a bed of roses;" — nay, it is attended with many and extreme difficulties, and the difficulties are exactly such as a genius and temper like Lord Byron's were least calculated to meet; — at any rate, least calculated to meet under the peculiar collateral circumstances in which he was placed. His income was very narrow: his *Newstead* property left him a very small disposable

surplus: his *Lancashire* property was, in its condition, &c. unproductive. A profession,—such as the army,—might have lessened, or almost annihilated, the difficulties of his peculiar position,—but probably his lameness rendered this impossible. He seems to have had a love of independence, which was noble, and, probably, even an intractability; but this temper added to his indisposition to bend and adapt himself to his lot. A dull, or supple, or intriguing man, without a single good quality of head or heart, might have managed it much better. He might have made himself subservient to government, and wormed himself into some lucrative place; or he might have lived meanly, conformed himself stupidly or cringingly to all humours, and been borne onward on the wings of society with little personal expence.

Lord Byron was of another quality and temperament: if the world would not

conform to him, still less would he conform to them. He had all the manly baronial pride of his ancestors, though he had not all their wealth, and their means of generosity, hospitality, and patronage: he had the will, alas! without the power.

With this temper, these feelings, this genius, exposed to a combination of such untoward and trying circumstances, it would indeed have been inimitably praiseworthy if Lord Byron could have been always wise, prudent, calm, correct, pure, virtuous, and unassailable: — if he could have shown all the force and splendor of his mighty poetical energies, without any mixture of their clouds, their baneful lightnings, or their storms: — if he could have preserved all his sensibility to every kind and noble passion, yet have remained placid and unaffected by the attack of any blamable emotion; — that is,

it would have been admirable if he had been an angel, and not a man!

Unhappily, the outrages he received, the gross calumnies which were heaped upon him, even in the time of his highest favour with the public, turned the delights of his very days of triumph to poison, and gave him a sort of moody, fierce, and violent despair, which led to humours, acts, and words, that mutually aggravated the ill will and the offences between him and his assailants. There was a daring spirit in his temper and his talents which was always inflamed rather than corrected by opposition.

In this most unpropitious state of things, every thing that *went wrong* was attributed to Lord Byron; and, when once attributed, was assumed and argued upon as an undeniable *fact*. Yet to *my* mind it is quite clear, — quite unattended by a particle of doubt, — that in many things in which he has been the most

blamed he was the absolute victim of *misfortune;* that unpropitious trains of events (for I do not wish to *shift* the blame on *others*) led to explosions and consequent derangements, which no cold prudent pretender to extreme propriety and correctness could have averted or met in a manner less blamable than that in which Lord Byron met it.

It is not easy to conceive a character less fitted to conciliate general society by his manners and habits than that of Lord Byron. It is probable that he could make his address and conversation pleasing to ladies when he chose to please; but to the young dandies of fashion, noble and ignoble, he must have been very repulsive: as long as he continued to be *the ton*, —the *lion*, —they may have endured him without opening their mouths, because he had a frown and a lash which they were not willing to encounter; but when his back was turned,

and they thought it safe, I do not doubt that they burst out into full cry! I have heard complaints of his vanity, his peevishness, his desire to monopolise distinction, his dislike of all hobbies but his *own*. It is not improbable that there may have been some foundation for these complaints: I am sorry for it if there was. I regret such littlenesses. And then another part of the story is probably left untold: we hear nothing of the provocations given him;—sly hints, curve of the lip, side looks, treacherous smiles, flings at poetry, shrugs at noble authors, slang jokes, ideotic bets, enigmatical appointments, and boasts of being senseless brutes! We do not hear repeated the jest of the glory of the Jew, that buys the ruined peer's falling castle; the d—d good fellow, that keeps the finest stud and the best hounds in the country out of the snippings and odds and ends of his contract; and the famous good match

that the Duke's daughter is going to make with Dick Wigley, the son of the rich slave-merchant at Liverpool! We do not hear the clever dry jests whispered round the table by Mr. ——, eldest son of the new and rich Lord ——, by young Mr. ——, only son of Lord ——, the ex-lords A., B., and C., sons of three Irish Union earls, great borough-holders, and the very grave and sarcastic Lord ——, who believes that he has the monopoly of all the talents and all the political and legislative knowledge of the kingdom, and that a poet and a bellman are only fit to be yoked together!

Thus, then, was this illustrious and mighty poet driven into *exile!* Yes, *driven!* Who would live in a country in which he had been so used, even though it was the land of his nativity, the land of a thousand noble ancestors, the land of freedom, the land where his head had been crowned with laurels, —

but where his heart had been tortured, where all his most generous and most noble thoughts had been distorted and rendered ugly, and where his slightest errors and indiscretions had been magnified into hideous crimes?

LETTER XXXII.

July 5.

A LARGE part of mankind think that it is a prime virtue to be content with the world as it is, and to take every thing placidly as it comes. I am not of their opinion. Others contend that no one has a right to find fault who is not himself perfect. I as little agree with these. Perhaps no complaint, no exposure, will entirely change the vices, the injustice, the hard-heartedness of society; but it may check and modify them. And as to the second position, it may be answered, that there are classes and qualities, as well as degrees, of wickedness, and among Milton's fallen angels some were more noble than others who were less guilty, and might therefore be

entitled to scorn, and endeavour to elevate the littleness of their inferiors.

Yet if the tongue of obloquy and foul accusation was ever busy with Lord Byron, at every moment and in every direction, the general voice was and will be, that he brought it on himself, and that it was no more than he deserved. The more one thinks on this strange mixture of excessive admiration and excessive hatred that followed him, the more one is astonished and puzzled. The common effect of great admiration, — at least in the public, — is to render the admirers blind to faults. It is especially the habit of those foolish triflers called *the world of fashion*. But in Lord Byron's case the hate and calumny uniformly augmented with the praise and the adulation. Had *all*, or *almost all*, the scandalous stories told of him been true, (instead of a twentieth part of them, which is the *utmost*,) the same candour, the same

measure of justice, would not have dealt to him as to other offenders. We see libertines, debauchees, free-thinkers, men of the most unaccountable eccentricities of daily action and manners, received every day in the world with open arms, kind looks, and smiling words, if they are what the ideotism of society dubs by the name of *persons of fashion.* But, then, to be sure they have a distinction from Lord Byron which I have not yet mentioned, and of which I will give them all the benefit; — they have no genius or talent to raise envy, they have no feeling, no heart, and their eccentricities are all *mere affectation*, and, what is more, the affectation springing from ignorance, stupidity, and babyism.

I know not what harm *many* of the singularities attributed to Lord Byron, and accompanied by so much odious censure, would have done if true. If he turned night into day, it was his

own affair: if he was irregular in his meals, and peculiar in his diet, it was his own affair: if he did not love mixed society, if he would not talk but to the companions of his choice, had he not a right to exercise this humour? If his temper was irritable, and his judgment sarcastic, is this imputed to *others* as a *crime?*

If Lord Byron had been the monster which detestable rumour represented him, then there was nothing which his genius had at that time put forth at all adequate to the redemption of his name, and to render the charm of his writings paramount to the disgust which ought to have been raised by his character. The fact is, that his writings were mainly the *reflections* of his character; and consistency required that they who admired one should admire the other. I suspect, then, that the *hatred* was sincere; the *admiration* hollow, feigned, and the

mere unexamined echo of a few leading spirits, who gave the tone in fashionable literature. This cause, no doubt, was mingled up with other whimsical ingredients, of which the fume of fashion is engendered; — such as novelty, wonder, applied both to the author and his compositions; and in these latter, a great sprinkling of strange, daring, licentious faults, which the taste for pungency, indulged by imbecile fashion, mistook for beauties.

Lord Byron had too manly, penetrating, and noble a mind, to be satisfied with a fame, which, however extended, was so hollow, and accompanied by so many frightful and heart-revolting drawbacks. He saw that even in his writings there was a constant disposition to divert the attention from the points where his strength and his merit lay, to throw it where the praise could not be supported, and invidiously to select features that

were the ebullitions of those humours, which, though he could not control, he in his hours of more sober thought regretted; and this, too, for the double purpose of connecting them with all his personal errors, and giving exaggerated strength to his indiscretions or his peculiarities. He perhaps knew well, as Johnson said of Milton, "what nature had bestowed "upon him more bountifully than upon "other men:" he knew, in spite of the occasional frailties of his being, what virtue, what superiority to vulgar goodness, there was in those happier fits of exertion, when the more sublime or more pathetic inspirations of his Muse broke into utterance, and were embodied in his most eloquent and enchanting language! Yet these, he found, were taken as vain words which availed his moral character nothing in the estimation of mankind; while all his ribaldry, all of his lower or more evil nature, were solely taken as

part of *himself!* "But what," cries the arch-censurer, "are all the fine senti-"ments in the world, if they are not "proved by concordant action?" The union is, no doubt, desirable and necessary to produce perfection; but is there no virtue in the grand and beautiful speculations of the mind, when they are sincere? We are not mere material beings; nor will the rectitude of our material conduct ennoble us, or render us good, if our minds are low, base, and vicious. On the contrary, there may be mighty and splendid greatness in the mind, even when our actions are sometimes frail! No one can feel grand, tender, beautiful, and just sentiments, who is not virtuous at the moment of their impression. The reverse of this, I am aware, must on the same principle be true; and for all that are bad in Lord Byron he must answer. But in this last class many more have been included by

a public, not equally nice on other occasions, than strictly and fairly belong to it.

So far, then, Lord Byron had much stronger reason for his bitterness, his discontent, and his misanthropy, than has been granted to him. It was not all *sunshine* with him, as has been represented: the situation he is said to have thrown away did not afford so much ground for gratitude, rather than gloom and hatred. He perceived that, while he was treading on flowers, mines of pestilence and destruction were beneath. Doors flew open to him; voices hailed him: but he was of a temperament too etherial to breathe well in the thick tainted air, — of an ear too nice to be pleased by the perfidious sounds.

All these, however, he would probably have continued to endure; and the dominion of his great intellect, the mellowness and sobriety of added years,

the calmness which long intercourse with mankind gives to the irritability of the temper and nerves, might gradually have secured to him a sort of fame and estimation less dangerous, and more satisfactory both to his judgment and his pride. All these were irretrievably defeated by a most ill-assorted combination of domestic events. It is absurd to suppose that any human understanding can command all the complicated trains of human affairs, and be answerable for consequences which will befall us in spite of wisdom and virtue. There is sometimes domestic misery where there is no fault. In the conduct of human affairs there may be derangement where no blame belongs to the master; and vast properties have been embarrassed and ruined from a thousand causes, for which the owners on whom the blow has fallen have not been responsible. It may be said that we ought to calculate all our

means, and conform ourselves to the abridgment of them, from whatever cause it may have arisen. This position may be abstractly correct; but never yet to any individual was it applied in all its severity. Any censure, therefore, as responsible for this cause, is not worth refuting, because I know not that any one has expressed it.

It seems, in fact, that Lord Byron was one whose pride and independence were maddened by the assaults and mortifications of pecuniary embarrasment. When complicated misfortunes and insults came upon him in floods, early in 1816; and when he found all the evils for which he deserved most pity turned into the most atrocious and most offensive charges against him; when the fruits of his enchanting genius served but to sharpen the tongue of public scandal; when he was pursued, and pointed at, and hooted at; when all that passion and hatred

could dictate on one side was heard; when all of malignant tendency was swallowed on that side, in defiance of the most repelling improbabilities; when nothing due to the grandeur of genius, to the charm of a justly-acquired fame, to proved manliness of temper and elevation of pride, was believed, or listened to, on the other; — there remained but one asylum, one retreat. It was to seek in foreign countries the peace which the base ingratitude and injustice of his own would not give.

Lord Byron then embarked for the Continent, and arrived by the *Rhine* at Geneva, in June, 1816. He has given a most rich and eloquent account of his *journey* to this city, and his residence here during the remaining months of 1816, in the *third canto* of *Childe Harold*. Whoever reads *that canto*, and is not impressed with the many grand virtues as well as gigantic powers of the

mind that wrote it, seems to me to afford a proof both of insensibility of heart and great stupidity of intellect. It required a soul of very extraordinary fortitude and grandeur not to be broken down and rendered lifeless by such trials and oppressions as Lord Byron had undergone.

We must observe, then, with astonishment and admiration in what a state of vigour, richness, and intellectuality the fountain of Lord Byron's heart, and his faculties of fancy and imagination, now displayed themselves. If, among the various powers with which he was so profusely gifted, he had now given way to his bitter wit and severe insight into all the obliquities of the human character with a relentless and death-darting raillery, could it have been an indulgence of passion and of vengeance, which (though it might have been regretted) could have been either wondered at or

thought unpardonable? — But, no! he surmounts this unamiable, though natural, passion; never was his heart more tender; never was his love of nature more intense; never were his thoughts more magnificent, or his images more brilliant! He threw away painful recollections by gazing on the gigantic scenery around him; he cultivated a solitude which I will not believe that guilt can endure; he awakened all his faculties to a degree of splendour, and a nicety of distinction and force of contemplation, which it seems to me impossible can co-exist with an evil and very loaded conscience.

I see, across the lake from the window by which I write this, the *Campagne* *, in which he resided, glitter in the sun. It is on an height, on which the blue expanse

* Campagne *Diodati:* a name rendered sacred by *Milton*'s friendship.

of water appears magnificently spread before it; and beyond, the *Jura* mountains; to the west, *Geneva* glittering beneath at a mile distant; to the east, at the top of the lake, *Lausanne.*

I doubt not that he had sometimes his fill of meditation here till he was sick; and that the cup of bitterness could not always be kept from his lips. He was not happy: but as *Charlotte Smith* exclaimed in one of her beautiful poems:

"Ah! who is happy?"

Let the reader turn to his description of *Rousseau;* and of the scenery of *Clarens;* and say, whether the fountain of tender love in Lord Byron's heart was extinguished, or chilled.

Milton says in *Comus:*

—— "When lost
By unchaste looks, loose gestures, and foul talk,
But most by lewd and lavish act of sin,
Lets in defilement to the inward parts,

> The soul grows clotted by contagion,
> Imbodies and imbrutes, till she quite lose
> The divine property of her first being."

Could Lord Byron's soul, when he wrote *this canto*, be imbodied and imbruted?

LETTER XXXIII.

July 6.

It is said that the crime of disseminating evil opinions is greater than the crime of evil acts; *first*, because it is more deliberate; *secondly*, because the example and influence extends wider, and because the source of action is thus attempted to be poisoned. Perhaps as a general proposition, cautiously applied only to the cases which strictly meet it in all its parts, this is true; but it must not be applied to an *occasional* intermixture of passages, even though they be decidedly liable to objection; much less to those which are doubtful; and least of all, where the general spirit of the composition counterbalances, or goes far to counterbalance, the mischief.

Whatever contains that which awakens the reader's imagination to grand con-

ceptions or grand emotions; whatever softens and refines the heart, and gives light, vigour, and impulse to the understanding; is an unquestionable preparative to virtue, even if it be not virtue itself. It will be answered, that men who have produced such fruits have been often vicious. I doubt it: men who have written the turgid, the affected, the false-pathetic, have often been so, because they were pretenders, and only *acted* a part.

In all our attempts to improve human nature, we ought always to have regard to its frailties, its dispositions, and the tendency of its passions: all excessive puritanism leads to hypocrisy, and breeds more mischiefs than it cures. It may be admitted that Lord Byron not unfrequently pushed this principle too far; but it may fairly be supposed that he acted upon it, and that it will often justify him in cases where he has been

most unsparingly blamed. It cannot be solidly and enduringly beneficial to society, that pretence and disguise should take the place and reap the reward of virtuous motives, and supersede good done for the sake of good. The practice of the world is to uphold decorum and outward appearances,—and *there* rest content. To pierce the veil, and show things in their true light, is a mortal offence, and always confounded (wilfully confounded) with an attack on virtue itself. If *truth* were not thus unmantled and brought to view, no sagacious mind nor sound taste would be pleased with it; and truth may surely be in general safely spoken; where it may not be spoken, the *onus probandi* lies on the side of the *exception.* There are, no doubt, cases, where pictures, though faithful, are yet pernicious or dangerous to morals. If the preponderant quantity of Lord Byron's works is of this cast, they ought

to sink. I, for one, most strenuously deny that it is so.

I can conceive a poet endued with great genius pandering to the corrupt passions of mankind for the purpose of acquiring a distinction which shall gratify his own vanity, or what is still worse, to gain money, which shall feed his own love of lucre, reckless all the while of the consequences to others, and regarding only his own selfish indulgences. Such a being, however gifted by nature, I pronounce to be base and rotten. The most radical and comprehensive of all the principles of morality is *to do as we would be done by*. Nor is this recklessness of consequences to others consistent with sound sense, and the very ends proposed; because if we need not pay attention to what shall result to others, others need not pay attention to what shall result to us.

There is, indeed, often a blindness, an

inebriety, a delirium in passion, which hides these consequences from men, and makes them flatter themselves that they may be exempted from general rules, and enjoy the pleasures without being subjected to the day of retribution; who go on with the charm as long as it will work; and care not who suffers, while their own ears can be tickled with flattery and applause.

There are parts in almost all Lord Byron's poems, and incidents in almost every part of his life, which refute the application of this character to *him!* His enemies and defamers have applied it to him: but much of the venom by which he has suffered has probably risen from the reverse of it; from the bitterness or ridicule with which he has attacked common passions and common follies; from the nobler impulses which he has striven to substitute for them; from the attempt to turn the tide of impetuous

passion, which the evil condition of human nature will engender, into grander vices, and delights more intense, more heart-felt, and spiritual! So it is that all the finer parts of Lord Byron's poetry would have made no impression either on the fashionable world or the mob of society, if they had come from a *saint:* it is an universal feeling that the reader prefers *Lovelace* with all his profligacy to the cold, tame, formal, unnatural *Sir Charles Grandison.* Lord Byron had all the attractions of *Lovelace*, with the addition of a splendid, elevating, and romantic genius! As cold, tame, rule-bound virtue is the least beneficial to society, so cautious, calculating, heartless vice does the most unqualified ill: it is a creeping, insidious poison, which wins its way imperceptibly, and is not detected till too late.

LETTER XXXIV.

July 7.

I REGRET that my letter of yesterday ended without developing the ideas it was intended to convey. I was interrupted by other more pressing occupations, and at the same time I felt my mind clouded, and my faculties feeble. With me, want of self-confidence is immediate want of power. I must leave, then, the imperfect manner in which the topics of that letter are treated to its fate, instead of returning upon stale ideas.

There are two principal things to be considered in estimating the merit of a poet's works: the choice in what is invented or reflected; and the manner, and power, and force, with which it is conveyed. As to Lord Byron, there is

not now, I believe, (nor perhaps ever was,) any difference of opinion as to conceding to him excellence in the *latter:* in the *former* there has been a most violent discordance, which probably still continues in no small portion of society, though much lessened.

I have been endeavouring to assist in this diminution, and to show that the odium and persecution which the objectors brought on Lord Byron, and the perverted comments by which they extended it to his personal character and all his actions, were grossly unfair and malignant, and ought in candour to be admitted as an apology, if not a justification, for much of that occasional asperity, ill humour with the world, raillery, defiance, ridicule of pretended virtue, and unsparing attack on those on whom the world confers its favours, which have been deemed so unamiable, so ferocious, and so unprincipled. Lord Byron had

seen mankind without a mask, partly from sagacity, and partly from suffering; and he was provoked to represent them with a rude and daring fidelity. He sometimes *caricatured:* but then every one must see that it was meant for a caricature.

And now I have got back to the point with which I ended my *thirty-second* letter. I repeat, that much of that gloom, and those bursts of indignation, displayed by Lord Byron after his retirement to the Continent in 1816, which have been pursued with such tirades of galling censure, had a natural and venial, if not justifiable, cause; and not only do not prove the heartless pride and selfishness imputed to him, but prove, on the contrary, that with all his outward port of haughty and reckless disregard, he had at the bottom a bosom which was the fountain of tenderness; a deep, considerate, contemplative mind, intensely

sensitive of the sorrows of our nature; a conscience awake, full of regrets, and ever pondering on our frailties; a fancy always conversant with beauty and grandeur; and an imagination accustomed to create not merely visions of material splendour but of moral sublimity! I recollect nothing in Lord Byron's poems, which is purely and merely descriptive: the strong feelings of humanity always intermix themselves with all his imagery.

Here, then, is the index of the moral state of Lord Byron in the summer and autumn of 1816. He who is conscious to himself of thoughts, sentiments, and powers vastly elevated above those who insult and traduce him can scarcely avoid to be agitated by strong emotions of spleen, resentment, and scorn. If he be not of a soft, feminine, sickly temperament, he will not answer the injuries by whining complaints and cowardly protestations of innocence; but he will

become desperate: he will break out into indignation, sarcasm, and exposure of his opponents, so severe as to seem inexcusably cruel to those who know not the provocation.

There are those — and a very numerous class — who will contend, that an author ought not in his poetical fictions designed for the public to intermix them with the colouring of his own private concerns. If Lord Byron had, in 1816, exhibited any brilliant fruits of fancy or imagination, and yet avoided such intermingled colouring, *then* I should have considered it as an infallible test that he had no heart or moral sensitiveness. It is on this very fact, on which so much frightful odium and calumny is built, that I found my conviction of his high sensibilities, and moral elevation of intellect. I speak this with reference to his compositions considered comprehensively: I cannot but feel that his genius, like his

temper, was irregular, and liable to not a few exceptions; but so inconsistent and imperfect is humanity, that I am afraid more restraint and self-control would, in checking his excesses, have also tamed and blighted many of his beauties. His fearlessness, his defiance, his very anger, gave to his pen not only a frankness, but a resistless fire, which is among its main attractions. It forms one grand distinction between him and almost all other poets: he never studies to write; he lays prostrate all the arts of composition, and kicks down all their rules, forms, and boundaries; he trusts to the weight of his matter to support him; and I do not remember a passage where he uses a trick or formulary of expression to support a trite or unnecessary thought,—and still less an absence of thought! He was a substantial character both in poetry and in life: he stood alone, where none had preceded him; none formed a part of him,

and none, I fear, will follow him. He acted from his own humours; he wrote and spoke nothing merely because it was plausible; he was himself, and none but himself, — whether he differed from others or agreed with them. The major part of those who enjoy the fame of poetical genius have nothing more than the minor talent to catch and communicate the images, sentiments, and thoughts which they think will shine most, and be most agreeable to the public; and are devoid of what proceeds from the internal fountains of the heart, or is the result of intimate conviction. They are therefore nothing better than repeaters, and add nothing positive to the stores of the intellectual world.

About the beginning of 1817 Lord Byron went onward to *Venice*, where, I believe, he remained two or three years. The fourth canto of *Childe Harold* gives some account of his residence here, and

of his visits to the *south* of *Italy* as far as *Rome*. I do not find that he ever went as far as *Naples*. He wrote several of his poems at Venice, and he indulged himself in many of its gaieties; but he at length grew weary of them. About 1820, he removed to *Ravenna*, and thence in 1821 to *Pisa*. It was not, I think, till 1823 that he quitted Italy for Greece. In July, 1822, he was deprived of his friend *Bysshe Shelley*, who was lost in a storm off *Leghorn*, by the upsetting of his boat, in returning to his campagne on that coast from a visit to Lord Byron at *Pisa*.

I can only judge of his head and his heart, of his amusements, occupations, and habits, during these important six or seven years of his life, by his writings. I pay little attention to the hundred silly stories which folly and malignity have busied themselves in circulating. So many have been proved to be false, that com-

mon candour ought to presume the rest to be so. That his mind was never idle, that his imagination exerted itself in eloquent and splendid inventions, is sufficiently attested. He has given an account, in a note to one of his poems, of the very few English he chose to admit to his society when at Venice; and much ill will and obloquy has been generated among his countrymen by that note. Yet the note was naturally and justly drawn from him by a gross provocation. He had not much reason to love his countrymen; and still less to love their society. He was not, like *Dante*, exiled by *law* from the land of his nativity: but he was exiled by circumstances not less painful, and certainly more inimical to private and personal attachments. A much less irritable man, and of more guarded habits and manners than Lord Byron, might well have avoided the flocks of his curious but ill-

discriminating countrymen, who come to stare and make wonders; and to repeat, without just observation, and even without regard to such knowledge as their feeble judgments have obtained, what they pretend to have learned.

It may be doubted, if any one who has a name to support in literature, even far below Lord Byron's, ought not to be very cautious and select in the persons with whom he associates. Authors have not always the power or habit of throwing their talents into conversation. There are some very just and well-expressed observations on this point in *Johnson's Life of Dryden*, who was said not at all to answer in this respect the character of his genius. I have observed, that vulgar readers almost always lose their veneration for the writings of the genius with whom they have had personal intercourse.

It has been supposed, that without a constant exercise of observation, without a constant familiarity with men and manners, all opinions of life are merely visionary, inexact, and empty. Lord Byron is at any rate a contradiction to this: his inexhaustible intimacy with living manners is among his numerous surprising superiorities. At the same time, it may be justly questioned if absolute solitude is good for man. All the faculties of the mind are freshened and invigorated by variety, by select conversation, and the endearments of social intercourse. From these Lord Byron never withdrew himself: he was no merely dreaming, merely ideal recluse; he had a keen delight in the cheer which generous spirits receive from hospitality; he loved all manly exercises. It might be said by him,

" Tower'd cities please us then,
And the busy hum of men,

> And throngs of knights, and barons bold,
> With store of ladies, whose bright eyes
> Rain influence: ——
> And pomp, and feast, and revelry,
> With mask and antique pageantry."

And such, I suppose, was the life he led at *Venice*. He was not, however, insensible to the manner in which his name was treated in England by very powerful parties, though he rose above it. His genius was praised, — sometimes fulsomely praised, — his poems were bought and read, — his assumed merits and demerits were upon every tongue: criticism paid a sort of worship to him; but it was a worship such as is paid to *the devil:* — a worship of fear, intermingled with ill-suppressed horror. There was a bitter thrown into the cup of every flattery, which turned it to poison; — and where there was not courage to attack him under the criticism of his own works, the most virulent flings

were made at him sometimes by single passages, sometimes by whole pages in articles which undertook to criticise the works of others. He had not only concealed as well as open enemies in every quarter, but sometimes, perhaps, also treacherous friends, who only paid adoration to the superiority of his genius out of fear.

Yet with all these obstacles, malignities, and misfortunes to contend with, he had also some advantages to spread the celebrity of his writings, and enforce the impression of his genius. It is a favourite position with those who have had the good luck to be popular, that real genius will always win its way, and that the popular opinion is always just. I cannot conceive a position more absurd in reason, and more disproved by facts and the whole history of literature. In theory and reason how *can* it be so? — What are taste and judgment but the

result of native sensibility and talent, improved by cultivation, experience, knowlege, and extensive power and habit of comparison? Does a common mind like *Milton* as well as *Pomfret?* or *Collins* as well as *Ambrose Phillips* or *Gay?* And how, if it were true, can poems be in every one's hands for half a dozen years, and then totally sink? And how happened it, that *Paradise Lost* was neglected by contemporaries, and the author seldom named, and *never cited* among the authors of his day?

I deny, then, that Lord Byron's great poetical merit was itself sufficient to gain him even a twentieth part of the unprecedented reputation which it reached. All great circulation of works, all immediate fame, is partly the result of a combination of lucky incidents, and partly of *management.* Much depends upon a publisher; much upon politics; much upon the influence of literary-friends and ac-

quaintance, — and, not unfrequently, much upon the author's personal intrigues. All these together, sometimes, will not do, when accidental circumstances will by themselves effect success: some extraneous events which befall the author personally and draw notice to him; some momentary interest in the subjects treated by him which inflames the popular curiosity and passion; something of oddity which pleases merely because it is new, &c. &c. If these, or any of these, happen to be united to real merit, then what has been thus accidentally brought into notice will keep its station. And thus, sometimes, these accidents even produce the genius, as well as bring it into notice; because there are occasions when encouragement and praise force into future bloom what accident had only first shown in embryo. Much of Lord Byron's fame was anterior

to the works which have entitled him to its continuance.

But the singularity of his character and of the events of his life unquestionably assisted in first bringing his poems into celebrity; and the skill and activity of his publisher, taking advantage of these circumstances, did also much.

These happened to fall, in Lord Byron's case, upon a soil where there was a fertility to ripen them into the richest harvest; where hope and praise lighted the fire of inspiration, and opposition only fanned the flame, when once it was lighted.

This concurrence of circumstances might not make him happy; the opposition that inflamed and strengthened might still wound; and there might be more of occasional bursts of short exultation than of steady and complacent enjoyment in the years of his intense yet clouded glory, which must have been

accompanied by so much feverish and variable tumult. But had he a temperament which would have been more happy in an ordinary and sober course of events? Were not restlessness and tumult his element? Was he not born to ride on the whirlwind, and battle with the tempest? His energies would have gangrened, and oppressed him to the earth, if they had not found vent. He had a dominion over the public mind, in spite of all its rebellions and all its enmities against him, which must have been an almost inebriating triumph to his aspiring and haughty mind.

I have serious doubt, whether any other concurrence of circumstances would have brought forward the poems which now attach to Lord Byron's name. The answer may be, that it might have brought them forward, not only different, but better. I cannot, in reply, controvert the *possibility* of this, but I am entitled to

deny the *probability!* Certainly nothing less than *violent* impulse would have done it; and I suspect that it must have been an impulse mixed up in some degree with anger and resentment. If his first poems had not been so rudely attacked, perhaps he might have written only smooth common-place poetry; and if misfortunes had not disgusted him with England, perhaps he might have sunk into a politician, or a luxurious noble, of ordinary habits.

Fruges consumere natum!

He might have lived! — but what is life worth, to be consumed in sloth and uselessness?

LETTER XXXV.

July 8.

It is universally agreed that mediocrity in poetry is not to be endured; but the greatest genius pays high for the few happy moments that it enjoys. The temperament of a genuine poet is too subtle and refined for the atmosphere in which he breathes. Lord Byron's mind, humour, and constitution, were less than ordinarily formed for long continued happiness; but they were formed for fits of intense delight. When alone, he must have been deeply and incessantly occupied:

—— "in sweet retired solitude
He plumed his feathers, and let grow his wings,
That in the various bustle of resort
Were all too ruffled, and sometimes impair'd."

Much has been said of his peculiarities. I never saw a real genius, or read the account of one, who was not peculiar, who had not many eccentricities of feeling, manner, and habit. I have seen popular authors, who were quite men of the world, and quite uniform, proper, and accommodating, in their intercourse with society; but, then, their writings were as tame, artificial, and commonplace as their manners.

Lord Byron's poetry does not lie upon the surface: it could not be washed or stripped off like an extra ornament on the outside of a gem, or a flower embroidered on a richly woven web: it has penetrated into the depths of the national mind, and intermingled itself with it: an abscision must pierce to the core, and leave a palpable void when the work is done. Perhaps this may be said of him, next to *Shakspeare*, — for all his poetry breathes of human life in its most ani-

mated movements. Fearlessness, the result of conscious strength, made him strike home; and then the fountain of the human bosom opened to him, and threw forth its abundant waters in all their vigour and freshness.

After all, one cannot help suspecting, on longer and more mature consideration, that one has been led to join in ascribing much more force to the objections made against such characters as *The Corsair*, *Lara*, *The Giaour*, *The Bride of Abydos*, *Parisina*, *Manfred*, &c., than belongs to them. The incidents, habits, &c., are much too remote from modern and European life to act as mischievous examples to others; while under the *given* circumstances, the splendour of imagery, beauty and tenderness of sentiment, and extraordinary strength and felicity of language, are applicable to human nature at all times, and in all countries, and convey to the best faculties of the

reader's mind an impulse which elevates, refines, instructs, and enchants with the noblest and purest of all pleasures.

At the close of the last century our poetry had grown languid and dull with excess of polish, and a timid adherence to beaten tracks. It then broke out into extravagances which appear to me still more objectionable; because, while they were much more unnatural than their predecessors, they were quite as artificial, — and extragavance and artifice in union are a little too revolting.

Lord Byron, therefore, did well to look out for subjects where splendid imagery and violent emotion could be displayed, with a strict adherence to the actual appearances and actual course of the human passions under the situations and events assumed. I do not say that this was exclusively with him a choice of pure abstract judgment. Fortuitous causes concurred in it; for, no doubt,

the course of his youthful travels, his personal experiences, and the bent of his own genius, had all a powerful influence. So far he was born under a lucky planet; for all *united* to raise him to the rank of one of our greatest poets.

I have said nothing about Lord Byron's *politics;* my concern with him has been as a poet: in politics, I have always entertained opinions very different from his; but never in my life did I allow myself, or even feel the inclination, to intermix political prejudices with literary taste or judgment. I have seen too much of the bane and poison of this intermixture in the last thirty years not to have been cured of it, had I even been originally so disposed. It is the canker-worm, or rather the direct and rapid destroyer, of our modern literature: it is ruinous to both sides, though of course the popular politicians have the advantage.

Lord Byron is accused of having been as licentious in the treatment of this subject as of subjects of morals and religion. His raillery and his jests are censured for their unbounded extravagance and virulence; and surely it cannot be denied that this charge is sometimes true, and that there are occasions on which he indulges in unaccountable vulgarisms,—and that in these cases the coarseness and bitterness of his personal satire cannot be justified by the interests of the political cause he undertakes to advocate, admitting that cause to be in all respects patriotic and just.

But here again the censure of Lord Byron has been much too indiscriminate, and carried much too far. If he thought, as many wise and good people have thought, that rational liberty was in danger, and that revolution had become necessary to correct and cleanse the

ruinous and deep-laid corruptions of power, he might be entitled to use very strong indignation, ridicule, and wit, in favour of the principles he espoused, — though still under the restraint of taste and decency. And he could not be expected to contemplate even glorious victories, which went to re-establish power he deemed dangerous to the happiness of mankind, with the complacency, and, still less, with the triumph, which they who held revolutions, and the anarchy they considered as attendant on them, in horror, would necessarily feel. To me, not all the cruelties of arbitrary power which history records can equal in horror the ferocities, the bloodshed, and ruin of revolutionary anarchy; — but different minds may honestly make different calculations, and see things in different lights. When once the attention is awakened to the evil conduct, the follies, the mistakes, the intrigues, the

treacheries, the corruptions of governments, it may find food for its denunciations which will not easily be exhausted. A mind of intuitive perception, like Lord Byron's, a heart of quick and strong emotion, and a frankness and force of language to give vent to his impressions, were almost inevitably led to many of those scornful ebullitions of overwhelming ridicule with which he has covered his political adversaries. The misfortune is, that wit and ridicule know no bounds; and the line between things which are fair game, and those which ought not to be touched, was never yet duly observed. There is something fatal in the stroke of ridicule, which puts esteem and respect at once to flight, — even when it falls on what ought to be held most sacred.

But Lord Byron has this only in common with other wits; and the objection goes to wit itself. The answer, indeed,

will be, that Lord Byron carries it to a greater excess. If he does, is it not principally because his powers are greater than those of others? Partly, also, from the general freedom and boldness with which he treats every subject he writes upon. "And this," it will then be observed, "is a reason why the indulgence "of wit is more dangerous in him than "in another!"

But I know not how to wish he had never written *Don Juan*, in defiance of all its faults and intermingled mischief and poison! There are parts in it which are among the most brilliant proofs of his genius; and, what is even yet better, there are parts which throw a blaze of light upon the knowledge of human life.

And thus, as one continues to investigate this subject from day to day, the clouds which at first seemed to press hard on this great man's brilliancy lessen and lessen, and his glories come out more and

more effulgent. The reflecting mind gradually catches something of his radiance; and then it finds that its former objections arose partly from its own narrowness and blindness when it commenced the view of him.

One of the pieces which has had the effect of throwing the most unfavourable hues, not upon the brilliancy of Lord Byron's poetry, but upon its results to society, is *Cain*. Yet, it must be confessed, that there is no inconsiderable portion of that poem which is second only to portions of similar import in Milton, — and many of them *not second;* in a style still sweeter and more eloquent, and with equal force, grandeur, and purity of sentiment and conception; such as the most rigidly-religious mind would have read, if it had come from Milton, or any other poet whose piety was not suspected, as the effusion of something approaching to holy inspiration. Let us then reconsider

this extraordinary poem, which we have abandoned a little too hastily; let us task our candour afresh, and enquire of ourselves, whether he who could write such passages could *mean* wrong? Let us recollect, that as the rebellious and blasphemous speeches he has put into the mouths of Lucifer and Cain are warranted by Milton's example, and the fact of *Cain*'s transgression recorded in the Bible, the omission of the design and filling up a character who should answer all those speeches might be a mere defect in the poet's judgment! *He* might think that Lucifer's known character, as an *Evil Spirit*, *precluded* his arguments from the sanction of authority, and that *Cain*'s punishment, and the denunciations which accompanied it, were a sufficient warning.

I know not that any objection has been made to *Heaven and Earth*. It has the same cast of excellence as the more per-

fect parts of *Cain*, but, perhaps, not quite so intense in degree.

It seems as if Lord Byron persuaded himself, with regard to his own being, that he had always within him two contrary spirits of good and evil contending for the dominion over him, and thus reconciled those extraordinary flights of intellectual elevation and purity with a submission to the pride, the ferocity, the worldly passions, the worldly enjoyments, the corporeal pastimes, the familiar humour, the vulgarisms, the rough and coarse manliness, to which he alternately surrendered himself, and which the *good-natured* public chose to consider as the *sole* attributes of his personal character. Much of his time must, however, have been spent in the musings by which these high poems, so compacted of the essence of thought, were produced; and, in all this large portion of his existence here, his imagination must have borne

him up on its wings into ethereal regions, far above the gross and sensual enjoyments of this grovelling earth. Did he deal, as minor poets deal, in mere splendour of words, his poetry would be no proof of this; but he *never* does so: — there is always a breathing soul beneath his words,

> " That o'er-informs the tenement of clay:"

it is like the fragrant vapour that rises in incense from the earth through the morning dew; and when we listen to his lyre,

> " Less than a God we think there cannot dwell
> Within the hollow of that shell,
> That sings so sweetly, and so well!"

If Lord Byron thought, that however loudly noisy voices might salute him with a rude and indiscriminate clamour of applause, his poems were not received with the taste and judgment they merit-

ed, and that severe and cruel comments were attached to them by those who assumed to themselves authority, and who seldom allowed the genius without perverting it into a cause of censure that more than outweighed the praise; those fumes of flattery which are imputed as the causes of a delirium that led him into extravagances, outraging decorum and the respect due to the public, never in fact reached him. To confer "faint "praise" is "to damn;" to confer praise in a wrong place is to insult and provoke. Lord Byron, therefore, had not, after all, the encouragement that is most favourable to ripen the richest fruit; and it was a firm and noble courage that still prompted him to persevere.

For this reason, as well as for those formerly mentioned, I think his foreign residences were more propitious to the energies of his Muse than a continued abode in England would have been. The

poison of the praises that were insidious did not reach him so soon; and he was not beset by treacherous companions, mortifying gossip, and that petty intercourse with ordinary society which tames and lowers the tone of the mind. To mingle much with the world is to be infallibly degraded by familiarity; not to mingle at least among the busy and the known, is to incur the disrespect to which insignificance is subjected. Lord Byron's foreign residence exempted him from these evils: he saw a few intimate friends, and he corresponded with a few others; but such an intercourse does not expose to similar effects. The necessary knowledge and necessary hints may thus be conveyed; but not all the pestilent chills which general society is so officious to unveil.

A high self-confidence is necessary for the production of all vigorous fruit: it of course is not the *sole* nor *primary*

essential; it cannot produce it, where genius does not already exist: where such does not exist, it will only expose to failures and inanities.

If Lord Byron had not had a mind with a strong spring of virtue within it, I think that he would have thrown down his pen at some of the attacks he received, and given himself up to the sensual pleasures of his rank for the remainder of his life. The finer parts of his poems were of such spiritual splendour, and so pure, though passionate, an elevation, that they ought to have redeemed any parts which were open to doubt from a malevolent construction, and even have eclipsed and rendered unnoticeable many positive faults.

LETTER XXXVI.

July 9.

LORD BYRON'S style, like his thoughts, had every variety: it did not attempt (as is the common practice) to make poetry by the metaphorical and the figurative; it followed his thoughts, and was a part of them: it did not fatigue itself to render clear by illustration, or important by ornament, because the thought was clear or important in itself: if the thought be sufficient to fill the mind, the ornament is superfluous; if it be not, the attention is drawn from the principal to the secondary. I do not mean to inveigh against occasional metaphors: there are figures which rise up with the thoughts unsought and involuntarily in particular moods of mind; but a constantly ornamented style is nauseous,

and an infallible proof of a minor and mere technical genius.

I have purposely forborne to fill these letters with extracts; but I must for once give an extract to exemplify my idea of a perfect poetical style, as well as perfection of poetical imagery and sentiment. It is from that proscribed and bitterly condemned poem, *Cain.*

" Cain.

" —— All the stars of heaven,
The deep blue noon of night, lit by an orb
Which looks a spirit, or a spirit's world —
The hues of twilight — the sun's gorgeous coming —
His setting indescribable, which fills
My eyes with pleasant tears as I behold
Him sink, and feel my heart float softly with him
Along that western paradise of clouds —
The forest shade — the green bough — the bird's voice —
The vesper bird's — which seems to sing of love,
And mingles with the song of cherubim,
As the day closes over Eden's walls; —
All these are nothing to my eyes and heart,
Like Adah's face: I turn from earth and heaven
To gaze on it."

In another place, speaking of the beauty of the sky, and the stars that light it, *Cain* says,

—— "What
Is this blue wilderness of interminable
Air, where ye roll along as I have seen
The leaves along the limpid streams of Eden?"

Did Milton ever write a more beautiful line than the last? It would be as easy to persuade me that there is no splendour or virtue in the sun, and no silvery radiance in the moon, as that he who could write such poetry as this was "imbruted and imbodied." I cannot contemplate such magical powers of composition without a degree of admiration, which I should not dare to express, even if I had adequate words at my command. And let it be remembered that the *whole* poem of *Cain*, from beginning to end, is composed in a style as beautiful. I remember when I *first* read *Cain*, I thought it, as a composition, the most enchanting

and irresistible of all Lord Byron's works, and I think so still. Some of the sentiments taken detachedly, and left unanswered, are no doubt dangerous, and therefore ought not to have been so left; — but the class of readers whom this poem is likely to interest are of so very elevated a cast, and the effect of the poetry is to refine, spiritualise, and illumine the imagination with such a sort of unearthly sublimity, that the mind of these, I am persuaded, will become too strong to incur any taint thus predicted from the defect which has been so much insisted on.

Wide as the regions of poetry were before, Lord Byron has surely enlarged their limits. He has added new and elevated pleasures to human existence, by teaching us to behold and feel some of its nobler appearances and emotions with new faculties. The world may be, in a great degree, what a real poet may make

it; the mere outward forms of things are insipid and inert; almost all the interest is derived from what the poet associates with them, or what he inspires them with. But he must perform his task according to certain laws of our nature, and in a manner with which the bosoms of others are formed to sympathise. The same invisible shapes are about us all: many cannot see them even when turned into palpable form, unless reflected from the fancies of others; and even when so reflected they make no impression, or no just impression, except they are of the genuine sort, except they are such as are common to our nature.

I can perceive nothing in what vulgar fashion or vulgar criticism calls poetry but gaudy, superfluous, and tedious words. Of all reading it is the least interesting and the most unprofitable. The effect of true poetry, on the contrary, is like a veil suddenly withdrawn, where all be-

fore was a blank, and a new scenery opened upon us, and a new order of beings to people it, at which a cheer and a glow strikes the frame, and a sunshine dances upon the chords of the bosom.

There are thousands of emotions that lie buried in the heart till such notes as those of Lord Byron awaken them, and then they make responses like the strings of the Æolian harp to the sighs, the murmurs, or the louder gusts of the wind. These responses may not be heard by others, but they are perceptible by him in whose bosom they are awakened.

I know not whether he, who, having genius, (much less such a genius as Lord Byron's,) does not cultivate and employ it, can be happy. I suspect that, like vigour of body, the very strength without exercise will turn to disease. The wonder is, how Lord Byron could do so much: — not that he did so little! — so young, too; so fond of out-door plea-

sures, and of all pleasures; and with so many thorns and regrets in his heart! — But variety did much; and the energy of genius fed the fire while it fanned it. There is virtue even in the very act of virtuous occupation, because it clears the mind of clouds, and disperses the unhealthful vapours which idleness affords opportunity to collect.

The trials, prejudices, and persecutions to which great genius is subjected in life, are among the mysterious ways of Providence, which cannot but perplex us, but which we cannot hope to fathom. The fact is, that Lord Byron's sensitive temper, united to a haughtiness which might be immoderate, but which was essentially intertwined with his genius, was exposed to affecting crosses and deep mortifications, even from a boy; and though he might resent them in a way which only increased their force, and gave new point to the weapons of his

enemies, yet a just judgment, dictated by a profound knowledge of human nature, joined to an enlightened regard to the principles of morality, must admit that they were often such as it required great magnanimity to surmount, and such as increased the wonder that his imagination and intellect shone so splendidly in spite of them, and that his spirits and energies were not oppressed and broken. It is base to pay no attention to these circumstances in his history, — to judge of him as if he had only a smooth path before him ; as if he fell into errors, and eccentricities, and violences, without temptation ; and as if he had at command ease and luxury, united with innocence and literature. No such lot attended him: he worked out his way under clouds, provocations, calumnies, hatreds; he set out with a fortune greatly diminished, and the relics deeply embarrassed by his ancestors; he had evil passions to contend with ; he burned for distinc-

tion, as all great minds ever burn ; — yet, for many years, all his efforts were turned to insult. The early death of his father, and the accidents of his boyhood, had broken the ties of blood, alliance, and station to which he belonged : the inundation of new families raised into sudden affluence, notice, and rank, had introduced a new set of purse-proud notions and habits, of which it was the delight and system to torment and tread upon the fallen branches of ancient and honourable houses. The manners of London began, about the period of his birth, to turn all the long-settled opinions and customs of upper society topsy-turvy. *Pitt*, though a strenuous opposer of the French Revolution, was the great instrument to level down the aristocracy before the democracy at home, by a profusion of indiscriminate titles, by an elevation of mean men into high places, and by a constant preference of the mercantile and manu-

facturing interests to the landed. Another tendency, if not intention, of his system, was to change the Lords' House into a popular assembly, and to break down the intervening power of the Whigs and great families. This effect, whether purposely or not, was completely produced before his death, and the present constitution of England is no more like what the Whigs made it in 1688, by putting King William on the throne, than that of present France is like what it was under Henry IV.

Lord Byron, then, had to begin life with the tide, winds, and weather, all powerfully against him. The struggle soon roused his energies into bitterness, — for he had not a spirit to be tamed. He scowled upon his enemies, and sometimes showed contortions in the depths of his resentment; and then a thousand tongues of reproach were opened upon him, because he was not placid in the state of

difficulty in which he was placed. And how did his resentment finally vent itself? Not in helpless despair; not in abandonment of vigorous exertion; not "in low "sullen sounds" of feeble complaint;— but he fled from a mean, upstart society, corrupted and enervated by new wealth, — sought adventure in distant travels, — and related, with all the splendour of poetic eloquence, the powerful sentiments and enlightened observations to which those enterprising travels gave rise.

When he returned home, and when, after a short triumph of flattering but deceitful days, new disappointments, still more heart-rending and more provokingly calumnious, came upon him, he retired again to the Continent, gloomy, but neither yet despondent, nor even abated in his fire; and then, for the remainder of his short life, he seemed, by the fruits he produced, as if he had only sat by the fountain of Helicon, and drank its waters, and dreamed its inspired dreams!

LETTER XXXVII.

July 10.

I PERCEIVE, since I wrote my last, that I am quite in opposition to the periodical critics on both sides in my judgment of *Cain*. But it is probable that there is some secret history in all this, about which I shall not concern myself. At any rate, one who writes openly, and cannot be suspected of private motives of any kind, may have as fair a chance of being right, as those from whom he differs. There is some advantage, indeed, in wearing a mask, because *omne obscurum pro magnifico est*. Thus I quit the subject, not at all inclined to retract, because I am not supported by the authority of reviewers.

I come to a point not of so much import to Lord Byron as a poet; — I mean

his *Letter regarding Bowles's Strictures on Pope*, dated from *Ravenna*, *7th Feb.* 1821. This was, probably, written hastily, and not originally intended for publication; at any rate, it is written inelegantly and clumsily, and is not worthy of Lord Byron's genius and taste. The *opinions* are such as I have always contended, and always shall contend, to be mainly right; but they are badly argued and illustrated; deduced from principles imperfectly understood, arranged in a confused manner, and often expressed with an aukwardness and even vulgarity which quite surprises me.

Johnson has said in his *Life of Gray*, that "an epithet or metaphor drawn from "nature ennobles art; an epithet or me-"taphor drawn from art degrades nature." He applies this to Gray's epithet of "velvet green." But Johnson's position thus broadly laid down is not just. Yet on this position, even still more extended,

is founded *Bowles*'s condemnation of *Pope*'s poetry and genius, and this is the judgment which Lord Byron undertakes to controvert; and which it seems that Mr. *Bowles* (for I have not seen his book) assumes to be founded on the "in-"variable principle of poetry." And all this I infer is exemplified by a reference to the image of a *ship*, which Mr. Bowles contends *cannot* be poetical, because it is a *work of art*. Lord Byron shows to what absurdities such a doctrine leads, and how many of the finest passages of poetry it would exclude. But Lord Byron argues only on the fact; he omits a much shorter and more decisive overturn of this ridiculous principle; he does not show that it is as contrary to theory and reason as to fact; for it assumes that all in nature is grand without the aid of human skill, and that Providence has left nothing to be done by man's own labour and ingenuity: — we might as well

say that the flower and the plant which cannot be reared without the assistance of man's culture and care exhibit no beauty which forms an image for pure poetry.

Lord Byron perceived and asserted that human nature constituted the grandest subject which regarded this state of being and the globe of its abode, and that it far exceeded in interest not only all of the inanimate parts of this earthly creation, but all else of animate existence; and that mere description of scenery, where man formed no ingredient, was comparatively unaffecting and imperfect. All this might have been safely ventured as an abstract position, instead of multiplying so many illustrations to prove a *truism*.

Lord Byron then *jumps* to the conclusion that moral truth is the primary object and grand ingredient of poetry; and that Pope dedicated himself most to moral

poetry, and was excellent in moral poetry; therefore Pope was the greatest poet! All this is surely an astonishing instance of loose reasoning and confused conceptions; especially from one possessed, not only of such a splendid imagination, but such a powerful understanding, as Lord Byron, and to whose own practical merits as a poet the whole of it was in utter contradiction. At the moment that Lord Byron could persuade himself that this *huddle* of opinions was correct, he must have experienced a sting of great self-humiliation; and, indeed, he expresses that humiliation with the noble frankness which was among the various merits of his great mind. He says that fashion has now "raised a grotesque "edifice" in poetry; and then says, "I "shall be told that I am conspicuous "amongst its builders;—true, and I am "ashamed of it. I HAVE been among the "builders of this Babel, attended by a

" confusion of tongues, but NEVER among " the envious destroyers of the classical " temple of our predecessor." Reasoning as Lord Byron at that moment reasoned, this self-condemnation was the inevitable result to an ingenuous mind; but had he given himself a little more time to *digest* his ideas, he would have found that *his own* splendid merit was not inconsistent with *Pope*'s splendid merit.

It is not easy to pursue Lord Byron through this letter on any plan, for all his thoughts are thrown together with strange irregularity, and form a perfect maze. In one place he lays down the strange assertion, that " the poet is always " ranked according to his execution, and " not according to his branch of the art!" Why, then, the writer of the best *epigram* is a better poet than DAVENANT, because *Gondibert* is not a perfect *epic*.

But here follows Lord Byron's main

position. "In my mind," says he, "the highest of all poetry is ethical "poetry; as the highest of all earthly "objects must be moral truth." There are those in whom this opinion of Lord Byron, thus worded, will raise a smile; but not in me: I believe that the smile will be a smile of levity, prejudice, and ignorance. The opinion is correct; and Lord Byron was sincere when he expressed it. But the strangeness is, that he suffered himself to be entangled in the trap of words, and to be narrowed in his deductions by an interpretation much too confined. He has thus been led to confound the *means* with the *end.* The end is *moral truth;* but the means ought to be *fiction,—imaginative creation!* Abstract truth ought to be embodied by feigned characters and feigned stories: as opinions and sentiments are generated in the mind, it ought to "body them "forth into form, turn them to shape, and

" give a local habitation and a name to " airy nothing." — This Pope in many of his *ethical* poems has *not* done; so far, then, Pope is deficient in the essentials of poetry. In these compositions Pope is a mere *versifier* for pages together. Now and then he mixes in them grand bursts of perfect poetry; for Pope could write not only beautiful but sublime poetry, when he chose: beautiful and sublime in *matter*, aided by all that the most perfect art could confer of polish and harmony in execution. And when he is not highly poetical, it is not, as Mr. Bowles supposes, because his images are not drawn from mere nature, — because his descriptions are not purely *picturesque* (in the technical sense), and confined to landscape-painting and rural scenery; but because he does not deal in any imagery or sentiment; because he does not *embody;* because he does not create and animate with life; because his thoughts,

though just and true, and full of observation, good sense, and deep reflection, are abstract, dry, not put into palpable form, and not shown in action.

Lord Byron has cited in favour of his opinions the two celebrated lines of Pope so often cited :

> " That not in fancy's maze he wandered long;
> But stoop'd to truth, and moralized his song."

And it must be confessed, that Pope himself seems to have used this language in the narrow sense in which Lord Byron understands it. But *fancy's maze*, thus put in opposition to truth, ought to be taken as the inventions of an unsound imagination ; such as do not represent truth, nor are framed according to the principles of nature, nor illustrate what exists, or can exist. Imagination is so far from being opposed to truth, that it is by the light of imagination that the purest and most perfect truths are repre-

sented. "The poet's business," says Edward Phillips, (Milton's nephew,) "is "to enlarge by feigning of probable "circumstances, in which, and in proper "allegory, invention principally consist-"eth; and wherein there is a kind of "truth even in the midst of fiction; for "whatever is pertinently said by way of "allegory, is morally, though not histo-"rically, true," &c.

But Lord Byron having admitted into his head this perverse idea of "*fancy*" (meaning "*imagination*") as opposed to truth, darts on without any regard to a distinction which, if he had given himself a moment to consider, he could not have missed, and allows himself to write the following absurd sentence: — "It is the "fashion of the day to lay great stress "on what they call IMAGINATION and IN-"VENTION, the two commonest of quali-"ties: — an Irish peasant, with a little "whiskey in his head, will imagine and

"invent more than would furnish forth "a modern poem." He here takes "invention" and "imagination" in the narrow and vulgar sense of *fabricated falsehood:*—not such as has regard to *verisimility*,—not such as is consistent with what is possible and likely,—not such as embodies an abstract verity. When Pope himself undertook to exhibit to the world the energetic and astonishing effects of the passions of love and religion united in a highly tender heart and most accomplished mind, he did not convey the results by dry philosophic elucidations, but by *personifying* them in Eloisa, one of the most brilliant *imaginations* that the known poetry of any nation can produce; most intense and most natural in its passion, most polished, most beautiful, most classical, and most perfect in its language, and most harmonious in its verse. Here, then,

Pope's genius surmounted his theory, and overturned his ordinary practice.

In another place, Lord Byron, with an extraordinary inconsistency and confusion of ideas, endeavours to prove that *art* is superior to *nature*, by saying, that "the great landscape-painter does not "give you a literal copy of a country, "but he invents and composes one." Now this is the precise overturn of his own position. It is *imagination*, not *art;* it is the reverse of the *truth* (taken in the sense in which he has applied it to Pope) on which he has placed Pope's merit. And then he has the following sentence, of which the last part is such, that I should have thought Lord Byron the last man from whom any thing so absurd could have come! "Nature, "exactly, simply, barely nature, will "make no great artist of any kind, and "least of all a poet; the most artificial,

" perhaps, of all artists in his very " essence."

Lord Byron says, that " Cowper is " no poet." It is true he does not belong to the highest class, because he wants *invention*. But this, according to the other parts of Lord Byron's argument, is no defect. He is at least as *ethical* as Pope; and this is the very merit on which Lord Byron contends in terms for Pope's superiority. Surely this is a more than common degree of inconsistency!

The great wonder of all is, that when it imported Lord Byron so much to know the true ground on which he himself stood; and when the effect of a deeper enquiry would have been to show that his own poetry was borne out by the grand and essential principles of his art when well understood, he should be content to perplex himself with such superficial, detached, and conflicting ideas, on the theory of that on which all his

own fame was to rest, and to which all his labours and cares were turned. His genius led him right; but, had he consulted his own rules and theories, he would have failed. What would he have made of *An Essay on Criticism*, or a set of *Moral Essays*, written after the model of Pope?

It is clear that Lord Byron means to rest Pope's superior claims on his producing what more especially comes home to our bosoms; what concerns the business of life, in opposition to those unnecessary freaks of imagination, which are at best but empty amusement, and neither make us better nor wiser; which are toys as whimsical as children play with, and as little instructive. But in the application of this principle he took a very slight view of its mere surface. He for a moment forgot that what comes deeply home to men's bosoms goes far beyond the ordinary concerns of the

mere necessary business of life; that the movements of the mind and the heart as much form a part of our being as those of the body; and that to direct the fancy and the imagination into right channels, and to give them food and exercise, is at least as useful, and surely more dignified, than the lessons which teach prudence and skill in common affairs, and which seem more solid because their effects are more seen by the eye, are more palpable to the senses, and more operative on the material part of our nature.

He did not then reflect that moral wisdom and moral truth are illustrated and enforced by pictures of the more secret and spiritual movements of our minds,—by the visions of the imagination, when it is under more vigorous and more noble excitement. He for the moment blended these with the baby fictions of childhood, folly, ignorance, and affectation. He seems to have adopted for

the occasion the doctrine contained in two lines of Collins:

> " Youth of the quick uncheated sight,
> Thy paths, Observance, more invite."

But they who will not often quit the paths of *observance* for those of *contemplation* and of *fiction*, in its best sense, must be content to belong to an inferior order of intellectual beings; notwithstanding Collins ventured this position in a fit of spleen, when he was tired of " reposing by Elysian waterfalls," and, perhaps, was under some momentary suffering from a neglect of worldly wisdom and caution. And if this theory of Lord Byron be correct, what becomes of the poetry of his favourites *Dante* and *Tasso?* I do not say what becomes of his own *Manfred;* his own *Heaven and Earth*, &c.; for these, at the instant he is under the dominion of such principles, he very consistently and honourably

gives up, and talks of "his own paltry "renown" with a humility which, during the furious dominion of such a prejudice, was, I doubt not, sincere!

I take the ordinary temperament of Pope to have been want of fire and quick emotion, and this temperament he had not endeavoured to counteract in early life, but to confirm. The accidental course of his studies, the models he proposed to himself, the taste of his age, all concurred to make him cultivate the walks of reason and observation, more than of imagination and the passions; but when either his passions or his imagination were roused they were deep, strong, and splendid. Notwithstanding *Eloisa* was an historical subject, his invention of circumstances of detail, his imagery, the changes and turns of passion, the brilliancy of hues thrown upon the whole, the eloquence, the tenderness, the fire, the inimitable grace and

felicity of language, were all the fruits of creative genius. This poem stands alone in its kind, never anticipated, and never likely to be approached hereafter. I do not, therefore, mean to remove Pope even the very least of all removes from the high seat where Lord Byron places him: I only deny the base on which Lord Byron puts him there. I can hardly doubt that a different discipline of his genius would have given to *all* Pope's productions the quality of *imaginative merit*, instead of that of *abstract morality versified*.

The following passages of Lord Byron have more of correctness: — "The at- "tempt of the poetical populace of the "present day to obtain an ostracism "against Pope is as easily accounted for "as the Athenian's shell against Aris- "tides; — they are tired of hearing him "always called 'THE JUST.' They are "also fighting for life; for if he main-

" tains his station, they will reach their " own by falling !" — " There can be no " worse sign for the taste of the times " than the depreciation of Pope."

As to the taste of the times, I believe it to be far worse than the taste of any other times in the four last centuries ; and that this is *one* of the signs, — but only one of a thousand. No former age was so fond of whim and extravagance ; — of the *falsetto !* Nor was literature ever before under the dominion of such factions and intrigues : there are certain monopolisers, who keep by intrigue and corruption what they have got by trick or accident : they secretly hate one another ; but they praise and counterpraise for mutual interest, and join against the common enemy, which they consider every new candidate to be, till, by management or chance, this new candidate is admitted into one of the leading factions ; and

then he adopts all the fashionable arts of war, and carries on the tactics with a zeal proportioned to his former dissatisfaction. Persons who do not belong to one or other of these cabals, have nothing to do but to say to themselves, *Meâ virtute me involvo ;* for self-consciousness of having deserved well is all the reward they will reap. But Lord Byron's dominion was not one of diplomacy : his was not a bloodless victory ; it was carried by the fierceness of the onset, and the fear that hovered over his banner.

—— " What terrors round him wait,
Amazement in his van, with Flight combined!"

The olive-branch was immediately extended, and peace-offerings were made at his feet. Like a generous foe, he received his enemies into his friendship, grasped the offered hand ; and gave his heart with the grasp. Whether in some of those thus received, fear still re-

mained the operative tie, time will show.

Ill-written as this letter of Lord Byron on the subject of *Bowles's criticism of Pope* is, a great deal of very curious matter lurks beneath the surface of it. It shows that Lord Byron's mind was not at ease with regard to his contemporaries. All their flattery had not blinded him: all their venom had not made him obstinate, though it had increased his darings. But neither had the extraordinary distinction which he enjoyed, nor the very extraordinary popularity of his writings, given him that just self-complacency, that gentle and smiling triumph, which the many and acknowledged proofs of his vast and towering genius were calculated to produce, even in a mind the most remote from arrogant and vain. It shows how much it is in the power of wasps and hornets to disturb the peace even of the noblest creatures; and it

affords a consolatory lesson to humble faculties and obscure fates in life, and warns them not to pine at their less splendid destiny; since supreme genius and supreme celebrity are still haunted by perplexities and failures of self-confidence.

Lord Byron in this respect forms a most extraordinary contrast with Milton. Lord Byron was in the full blaze of his fame, — a blaze which very rarely shines on the living brow of genuine and lofty genius, — but which shone on him, while he might rationally expect that it would be as lasting as it was early and bright; yet he was still harassed with doubts and misgivings sufficient to cloud the joy of the triumph. Milton brought forth his *Paradise Lost* in darkness and neglect; and the following is *Johnson*'s noble description of the effect he supposes it to have had on him: — "Fancy," says he, "can hardly forbear to conjec-

" ture with what temper Milton surveyed
" the silent progress of his work, and
" marked its reputation stealing its way
" in a kind of subterraneous current
" through fear and silence. I cannot
" but conceive him calm and confident,
" little disappointed, not at all dejected,
" relying on his own merit with steady
" consciousness, and waiting without im-
" patience the vicissitudes of opinion,
" and the impartiality of a future gener-
" ation." — There is, perhaps, a grandeur in the endurance of this sort of injustice, which elevates the mind far above the triumph of success. It calms the mind more, and is free from the painful langour that follows extravagant expectation and excessive excitement.

But if Lord Byron had an unbounded and oversetting quantity of incense paid him in his life, he had at least an equal quantity of tremendous and insatiable obloquy. Others, however, who have not

had the same solaces and charms to counteract it, have not been secure from bitter calumny and reproach. The sanctity of Milton was no proof against such attacks. His politics exposed him to foul aspersions which the royalists heaped upon him; and the same passions have descended to posterity, and vented themselves in the same way upon him. Johnson speaks of his "envious hatred of greatness;" his "sullen desire of independence;" his "petulance, impatient of controul, and "pride, disdainful of superiority;" his "hatred to all whom he was required to "obey;" his "predominant desire to "destroy rather than to establish;" and his feeling "not so much of love of "liberty as of repugnance to authority;" — and still worse, in another place, of a "malignity, at whose frown hell grew "darker," &c.

Lord Byron had no part of Milton's learning, and could not fortify and render firm his opinions as Milton could. What he did was the impulse of mere native force; and this, in arguing points which are partly technical, will sometimes fail a man. Had Milton taken on himself to controvert such principles of poetical criticism as those ascribed to Bowles, he would have done it in a very different manner. He would have shown, both from reason and from the authority of all ancient critics of reputation from the earliest times, that the strange species of *exclusiveness* endeavoured to be set up, not only was never, from the time of Homer till that of Spenser, thought of as a primary essential, but not even made *one* of many essentials; that from the very origin and nature of poetry, illustrations drawn from the works of men must always have entered into it as

among its most interesting and grandest images and figures.

Conceive for a moment this famous line in Pope's *Eloisa*,

"The shrines all trembled, and the lamps grew pale,"

to be denied the beauty of pure and high poetry, because *shrines* and *lamps* are works of *art!* I think it has been observed in some criticism on this subject, that a man may be a great poet who does not know an oak from a sycamore or poplar, or a field of wheat from a field of barley! It is not necessary that there should be any images at all in every part of poetry, — much less images merely drawn from nature: — whole pages may be found in Milton, sentimental, spiritual, and intellectual, — but rarely of pure dry abstraction.

A spirit of petty criticism, which set up coxcomical and narrow principles, that turned poetry into an artificial filla-

gree-work of effeminate ornament, began to grow up a little before the death of Pope; and though it underwent various little changes of fashion till the end of the century, still it was all in the same spirit of feebleness and little unmanly glitter. Dr. Joseph Warton, though a man of great taste, and an ingenious, elegant, and extensive scholar, contributed to this. He began with good intentions, and on principles mainly right: but his desire to draw the nation to a higher order of poetry than the dry didactic versification which Pope's example had rendered prevalent, urged him too far to the contrary extreme.

LETTER XXXVIII.

July 11.

DR. JOSEPH WARTON was a leader among those who drew the public taste from poetry of *matter* to poetry of *style*; — a most unfortunate change, from the substance to the shadow! Hence ensued a prevalence of artifice, formality, coldness, and insipidity. For matter, even if it be not poetry, is still worth something; but idle words, and glitter in wrong places, not only give no pleasure, but disgust! Nothing could be so stupidly mechanical and senseless as an *Ode to Memory*, or *to Hope*, or *to Fancy*, or *to Sculpture*, or *to Morning*, *Noon*, or *Night*, &c., with which all the anthologies were over-run. Even the splendid imaginations of Collins and Gray began to lose their charms when confounded

with such masses of noisy and turgid affectation.

A contrary extreme (as always happens) at last followed; and then chaos came again, and rudeness and irregularity were all the vogue. Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* were popular, and still justly continue to be so; but I have not perceived that they ever had any practical effect on the poetry of the day. I remember that *Mason*, the *Wartons*, and *Hayley*, continued to write as they wrote before; and when *Cowper* and *Burns* afterwards came forth, in 1785 and 1786, neither of them had formed themselves on Johnson's precepts or taste; and still less did *Darwin*, who broke forth in 1789, follow them. After 1789 commenced the attempt to return back nearer to the simplicity and energy of nature; and shortly after this, some of those who still enjoy the greatest reputation became known to the public: —

I scarcely need name *Wordsworth*, *Coleridge*, and *Southey*, as the poets alluded to. The public loves novelty so much, that they who had kept in the beaten paths could not hope to attract the same attention. There was, however, one exception: — *Rogers*, who seems to have formed himself on a mixed model of *Goldsmith* and *Shenstone*, became popular soon after his first appearance in 1786. *Crabbe* has had the most singular fate. His poems, describing familiar life and the habits of pauperism, with a fidelity which gained the applause of Burke, were noticed for a year or two; the author then fell into silence and oblivion for thirty years, and all at once emerged again in his old age, and has received a degree of praise from the Edinburgh reviewers, which seems as if he was better suited to their sincere taste than any other poet of their times. *Scott*, *Moore*, and

Campbell, appeared a little later, each with a manner of his own.

I do not mean that many others, here omitted to be mentioned, have not written good poetry during this period. But for some cause or other they have not been equally marked out to the public, or equally adopted by it. I have never ceased to express the opinion, that popularity is not the test of merit: the whole history of poetry, in every age and every country, proves it. The various modes by which popularity is attained, — some of accident, some of management, some of novelty, some of merit, — would make a curious volume, or perhaps half-a-dozen volumes, if accompanied by anecdotes and biographical sketches. From *Valerianus de infelicitate Literatorum* to the amusing volumes of *D'Israeli*, the materials are abundant.

There are those who say, that though not every one who attains celebrity de-

serves it, yet none miss it who are entitled to it. *Edward Phillips* (and we must take this to be the opinion of *Milton*) thought otherwise: "Among the writers "of all ages," says he, "some deserve "fame and have it; others neither have "nor deserve it; some have it, not de- "serving; others, though deserving, yet "totally miss it, or have it not equal to "their deserts."

When Lord Byron became a candidate for poetical fame, *Sir Walter Scott*'s poetry was in the height of its renown; but he did not form himself after this model. His *Hours of Idleness* are more in the manner of a preceding generation, and *Childe Harold*, if it had any prototype, was more in the mingled tone of *Beattie* and of *Mickle's Concubine;* and I think it is probable that Lord Byron was always a great reader of *Pope*.

There are parts of his *Letter on Bowles's Strictures* which regard the

attacks on Pope's moral character; — and here his indignation is generous and just. Why should the poet's papers be raked up, and told the public, at the distance of eighty years, not by a production of copies, but by dark comments, for the purpose of throwing obloquy on the purity of his affection for Martha Blount? All this trial of genius, by a rigidness of examination not applied to common men, is very uncandid and very unwise. It was rather unlucky for Pope's fame that the task of editing his works should have fallen on Dr. Warton, who had been the great opponent of his school of poetry; but it was doubly unfortunate when it fell, a second time, on one of Warton's own scholars, who, in respect to his master, would naturally push his doctrines further than Warton himself could in decency do. *Thomas* Warton would have performed the office much better: he was a more original genius; a more

vigorous, if not more elegant, scholar; was more enlarged and comprehensive in his taste; and knew the details of the history of poetry, especially English poetry, much better. He would not, indeed, have dealt in so many light anecdotes, and so many sprinklings of the flowers of literature, as render Joseph Warton's *Essay* and his *Notes* so popularly amusing; for the *Essay on Pope's Genius* is a work of great attraction, the fruit of a rich and refined memory, and a nice and amiable taste.

Lord Byron says, that "in these days "the grand *primum mobile* of England "is *cant;* — cant political, cant poetical, "cant religious, cant moral; but always "cant, multiplied through all the varie- "ties of life. It is the fashion, and "while it lasts will be too powerful for "those who can only exist by taking "the tone of the time."

Two traits of Lord Byron's character,

scattered in *this Letter*, may be here selected, as standing on his own authority. "I look upon myself," says he, "as entitled to talk of naval matters, at least to "poets: with the exception of WALTER "SCOTT, MOORE, and SOUTHEY, perhaps, "who have been voyagers, I have SWAM "more miles than all the rest of them together now living have ever SAILED, "and have lived for months and months "on ship-board; and during the whole "period of my life abroad have scarcely "ever passed a month out of sight of the "ocean,—besides being brought up from "two years till ten on the brink of it. "I recollect, when anchored off Cape "Sigeum, in 1810, in an English frigate, "a violent squall coming on at sunset, "so violent as to make us imagine that "the ship would part cable, or drive "from her anchorage. Mr. Hobhouse "and myself, and some officers, had "been up the Dardanelles to Abydos,

" and were just returned in time. The
" aspect of a storm in the Archipelago
" is as poetical as need be, the sea being
" particularly short, dashing, and dan-
" gerous, and the navigation intricate
" and broken by the isles and currents.
" Cape Sigeum, the tumuli of the Troad,
" Lemnos, Tenedos, all added to the as-
" sociations of the time. But what
" seemed the most poetical of all at the
" moment, were the numbers (about
" two hundred) of Greek and Turkish
" craft, which were obliged ' to cut and
" run' before the wind from their un-
" safe anchorage, some for Tenedos,
" some for other isles, some for the main,
" and some it might be for eternity.
" The sight of these little scudding
" vessels, darting over the foam in the
" twilight, now appearing and now dis-
" appearing between the waves in the
" cloud of night, with their peculiarly
" white sails, (the Levant sails not being

" of coarse canvass, but of white cotton,)
" skimming along as quickly, but less
" safely, than the sea-mews which ho-
" vered over them; their evident distress;
" their reduction to fluttering specks in
" the distance; their crowded succession;
" their littleness, as contending with the
" giant element, which made our stout
" forty-four's teak timbers (she was
" built in India) creak again; their as-
" pect and their motion; — all struck me
" as something far more poetical than
" the mere broad brawling shipless sea,
" and the sullen winds, could possibly
" have been without them."

This is a very beautiful passage, in which Lord Byron throws fine poetry into his prose. The other passage is this: —

" I have seen as many mountains as
" most men, and more fleets than the
" generality of landsmen; and to my
" mind a large convoy, with a few sail of

" the line to conduct them, is as noble
" and as poetical a prospect as all that
" inanimate nature can produce. I
" prefer 'the mast of some great admiral'
" with all its tackle to the Scotch fir or
" the Alpine tannen, and think that
" more poetry has been made out of it."

It was this poetical life (if I may so call it) led by Lord Byron, which gave a freshness and reality to his compositions that goes through the whole frame of the reader, and will never lose its power. Many years ago, in a printed character of *Burns*, I remarked the same thing of *him;* but the life of *Burns* was in no degree so adventurous and varied. Spain, Portugal, Greece, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, and Greece again! — what numerous, grand, and gigantic forms of nature and of art had Lord Byron's eye been accustomed to gaze upon! But, perhaps, nothing is so grand as the ocean, and this was his element.

" And I have loved thee, Ocean ! and my joy
Of youthful sports was on thy breast to be
Borne, like thy bubbles, onward : from a boy
I wanton'd with thy breakers, — they to me
Were a delight; and if the freshening sea
Made them a terror, 'twas a pleasing fear;
For I was, as it were, a child of thee,
And trusted to thy billows far and near,
And laid my hand upon thy mane, — as I do here."

Again he exclaims, —

" There is a pleasure in the pathless woods;
There is a rapture on the lonely shore;
There is society, where none intrudes,
By the deep sea; and music in its roar," &c.

These passages would, perhaps, be read without emotion, — at least without the strong emotion which they awaken, — if we did not know that Lord Byron was here describing his actual feelings and habits, and that this was an unaffected picture of his propensities and amusements even from childhood, — when he listened to the roar and watched the bursts of the northern ocean on the tem-

pestuous shores of Aberdeenshire. It was a fearful and violent change at the age of ten years to be separated from this congenial solitude,—this independence so suited to his haughty and contemplative spirit, — this rude grandeur of nature, — and thrown among the more worldly-minded and selfish ferocity, the affected polish, and repelling coxcombry of a great public school ten miles from London, where new-sprung lords filled their children's pockets with money and dandled them with luxuries, and stock-jobbers, and contractors, and manufacturers, clad their boys in gold; — where all was estimated by *Tattersall*'s, and *Almack*'s, and the gayest equipages in the Park, and the finest houses in the fashionable squares, and the greatest familiarity with the two chief clubs in St. James's Street. How many thousand times did the moody, sullen, and indignant boy wish himself back to the keen air and boisterous billows

that broke lonely upon the simple and soul-invigorating haunts of his childhood. How did he prefer some ghost-story; some tale of second sight*; some relation of Robin Hood's feats; some harrowing narrative of buccaneer-exploits, to all of Horace, and Virgil, and Homer, that was dinned into his repulsive spirit! To the shock of this sudden change is, I suspect, to be traced much of the eccentricity of Lord Byron's future life. There is great good in public schools; but there is also great evil: a boy must be prepared for them not only in learning, but in habits: if he be not pliant and supple, he will not make his way; and if he be, he will, of course, lose all his energies: he is more likely to exhibit scholarship, but much less likely to exhibit genius. Which of our modern fashionable poets have been educated at

* See Collins's Ode on the *Superstitions of the Highlands.*

a public school? I believe only *Southey!* I am aware that *Cowley*, *Dryden*, *Collins*, and *Gray*, were so educated; and all were scholars!

I am not one of those who exactly think that *whatever is, is best;* but I very much doubt whether those crosses, contrarieties, and mortifications, which afflicted Lord Byron's life, were not main nutriments to the sort of poetry which he produced. This will probably raise the observation, that, admitting the justice of it, it does not follow that a different and more tranquil life might not have produced a *better* sort. Certainly it is not impossible! Better poetry than Lord Byron's is yet *possible:* but they who think it *probable*, must have a very *sanguine* idea of human genius! Pathos and melancholy are among the prime springs of high poetry; and joy is apt to be too self-satisfied for much exertion.

LETTER XXXIX.

July 12.

Lord Byron belonged to no *school of poetry;* and I hope that he will not be the *founder* of any school, — because it will be dangerous to tread in his steps without his powers. He drew as much as suited his purpose from *every* school, to aid his own thoughts and expressions. Schools of poetry are, indeed, always bad things: they controul and cramp genius, and make minor poets mocking-birds. All that has been said of Lord Byron's *borrowings* may be conceded, yet not detract in the smallest degree from his genius. *Hurd* has written *Essays on the Proofs of Poetical Imitation:* he was a dry, ineloquent writer; but he had a strong analytical head, and was ingenious in his own department: his

proofs, if I recollect, are clearly developed and defined; but I cannot recall to my mind (for I have not seen his book for many years) whether he enters into the question in what cases these imitations do, and where they do not, discredit the genius of the imitator. If they only form *one* of the ingredients of the imitator's own combination or creation, if they perfectly amalgamate with it, instead of forming *patches* upon it, the borrowing is no more than borrowing any of the separate images of nature to form a new landscape. The greatest inventor must use materials which *separately* are not new. This is so clearly the use which Lord Byron makes of his borrowings, that I cannot suppose any sound-minded critic will venture to deny it.

I have already said in these Letters, — I suspect that I have *repeatedly* said it, — that the great distinction of Lord

Byron's poetry is that it lies in his *matter* more especially than in his *style*. His style is excellent, but it is so *because* it is the most proper and most congenial vehicle of his matter. To illustrate this position, let me take *The Corsair*. What is its attraction? Does not the interest lie in the characters, sentiments, passions, actions, and attendant scenery of the hero and his mistress? We do not think of the style, — of the manner in which it is told, except so far as it impresses the subject itself.

Is this the case with the generality of poets? With them all the interest lies in the expression, in the mode of conveying an idea or fact: there is no novelty, nothing of particular import or force in the idea or fact itself. I could instance this even by a very splendid poem of a very great poet, — *Gray's Bard*. What is there new in it of character, facts, thoughts, or scenery? The whole charm

is in the poetical language, the imagery, the arrangement, the versification, and the brilliant style! Let me not be accused of invidiousness in saying this! I hold Gray to be the second, if not the first, lyric poet of our nation: I consider the *Fragment on Vicissitude* to have the finest passages of lyric poetry in the world; and I do not believe that so perfect a poem of its kind as the *Elegy* will ever again be written.

But I resume, that Lord Byron was pre-eminently a poet in substance, if I may use the word *substance* for that of which the essence is *spirit*. His poetry is so much so in its ore, that its character would remain even if told in coarse, rude, bold language. Put *Lara*, or *the Lament of Tasso*, into bad prose, yet their integral character and interest cannot be destroyed. There is very little poetry of any country or of any age which will bear this transmutation. All common

poets are *fanciful* in the unfavourable sense of that word,—Lord Byron is never so.

The poetry of *words* is that which gives pretence to severe minds to treat the art with contempt. They call it *empty*, and ask what is learned by it? Is there any one who will venture to say this of Lord Byron's poetry? Sweep it all to the consuming fire; let not a page remain, nor any memory of a page, or a line! — what a multiplicity of new incidents, new characters, new images, new sentiments and passions, new scenery, new reasonings and reflections, new views of things, and new expressions, will be destroyed! A whole creation will be blotted out; a world of new forms, new beings, new intellectualities will be extinguished: not a world of babyish inventions, such as may amuse idle leisure when it wants to exercise a petty ingenuity, but a world such as

those who have had a glimpse of it perceive gives new energies to our nature, new charms to our existence, and new light to our understandings.

We had not time to estimate duly the brilliancy which came upon us with so much rapidity. Lord Byron's inexhaustible genius eclipsed his own light,—as one wave swallows up another. Flash after flash, and thunder after thunder, till the very excess blunted and confounded our perceptions.

I think in some bantering verses of Dr. Johnson, on the poets who affected the *romantic* school, he says,

"All was strange, yet nothing new."

It might be said of Lord Byron, that

"All was new, yet nothing strange."

In all his wild imaginations he was still true to *nature;* he still struck some chord of the human bosom, that answered as if

touched by magic. He who works himself up by effort into the imaginations which he forms, may get into mazes into which he will find no one who will follow him; but he on whom imaginations come quicker than he can develope, who has only to select among those which haunt him, is sure of sympathy, if he can but find language to communicate them. Those invisible beings that visit us involuntarily are round all; though, without the aid of the lamp of genius, they cannot be perceived by all. Lord Byron had a lamp which reflected multitudes of them seen by none before; though acknowledged by all when thus shown in palpable shape.

Like the ideas and intelligence contained in an unknown language, which are locked up till industry opens them by acquiring a knowledge of the tongue in which they are registered, Providence has destined that the highest riches of our

being should be hid from us till unveiled and embodied by the eye and tongue of genius. These are the tasks to which Lord Byron's powers, propensities, and ambitions impelled him.

On the other hand, the *matter-of-fact* part of mankind say and think, that what there is of grandeur, beauty, and attraction, in this world, exists without the aid of poets, and will be experienced without any pointing out by them. They might as well say that a buried inscription would be read as well before the covering of earth and moss should be cleared from it by a skilful decypherer.

But to be merely a master of expression and the art of writing is a comparatively trifling endowment; commonly nothing more than dressing with a little ornament, or exhibiting, in a more showy point of view, what is already known to others! What that is new can be told of *pity*, or *memory*, or *hope*, or *despair*, *envy*,

jealousy, *malice*, *calumny*, &c. &c.? Their attributes, their motives, and their modes of action, are all familiar to the human mind, and to embody each of them into one corporeal and active being is, in the common practice, but a mere piece of mechanism.

It has been observed, that all Lord Byron's inventions are more or less identified with himself, and therefore have some foundation in reality and experience. This has been mentioned as having narrowed the character of his inventions compared with those of *Shakspeare* and others; but it has given them intensity of energy and fidelity. If Lord Byron could have been detached from *self* in the origin and conduct of his pieces, the chances are that they would not have possessed the same life and certainty. In ordinary cases, *self* is a very uninteresting person; in the present, the reverse was true.

One can never cease to wonder by what processes, so far as self-discipline went, such a being was formed. Very little of his time could have been spent in the peace and solitude of the retreats of learning; he had little aid of artificial acquirement; much of his time was spent in *travels*, and in such as required great exertion of bodily enterprise; but, added to this, not less is supposed to have been spent in dissipation and the pursuit of youthful pleasures. His habitual amusements were in the open air; riding, swimming, sailing, exploring countries. He loved sociality with the chosen friends or acquaintance whom he admitted to his confidence, and half his evenings, even till midnight, were consumed in free conversation.

His temper was liable to be ruffled, and his passions are known to have been violent; and these do not leave one in a state very well adapted to high poetical

composition. The mind cannot be vigorous when the body is languid or exhausted.

All this shows that genius is paramount to any combination of external circumstances, and whatever way it works, or however it be managed or cultivated, imagination will still produce its fruit: the spirit will find an intercourse with its congenial beings; and the cup of Helicon will throw off the impurities that would debase its inspiration.

A truth so consolatory, so elevating as this, is not exhibited for the first time in the case of Lord Byron. Instances of it may be found in all literary history: the cases of *Dante* and *Tasso* do not apply, because their impediments and misfortunes came after their genius was formed. One modern instance, even of our own time, of another brilliant star occurs, which may be more nearly applicable. The splendid powers of

Burns surmounted the poverty and obscurity of his birth, and the anxieties and distresses of his future life.

I know not how to compare Lord Byron and *Burns:* — they had not, I think, much in common in their genius; but it requires a nicer power of distinction than mine to show precisely the difference. I do not think that they would have been much alike in a similar station, and under similar circumstances. Lord Byron was more vigorous, more expansive, more visionary, more inventive, more intense; — Burns was more delicate and tender, more pliable, more mellowed, more plaintive, of a more softened melancholy, less gloomy, and sullen, and haughty, and daring. This is the more striking, because their respective situations would have led to reverse these characters.

Each of them *lived* in the poetical character which his works reflect: of

each, the poems were the representations of existences, and not the mere skilful artifice of words.

I do not think that Lord Byron could ever have written exactly the kind of *songs* which *Burns* has written. There is something more supplicatory in Burns; — something of tenderness which makes him put himself more at the mercy of another; — yet Burns is nobly independent; still he has less of the *defiance* of haughtiness: — he has something less of the stubbornness of the oak, though he has not the pliancy and suppleness of the willow. His images from nature are not so grand, nor surrounded by such an atmosphere of blazing intellect, as Lord Byron's; but yet there is a playful fire about them; they dance like the innocent and cheerful coruscations of the autumnal lights; as no one can deny is the case with his exquisite *Tam O'Shanter*.

It is a singular coincidence that Collins, Burns, and Lord Byron, each died at the early age of thirty-six. And what a mixture of deep melancholy and suffering there was in the fate of all of them. Collins died insane; Burns heart-broken; and Lord Byron, though in the midst of his glory, yet drenched in envenomed calumny, and writhing with the poison of it in his heart!

LETTER XL.

July 13.

I HAVE said nothing of Lord Byron's last public action, — his enterprise to assist the Greeks: I have avoided it, because these Letters have abstained from all concern with politics. It is a noble cause; and it is not necessary for me to enter into the question of *expediency* on which Mr. Canning touched in one of his speeches of the session just terminated. There are possible cases of expediency to which regard must be had in politics; but expediency is always a dangerous argument, because it is an excuse for *any* deviation from principle. We are not bound to find intelligence for the despot of Turkey, or to yield to his misapprehensions, lest the disregard of them should involve us in a war with

him. Because *he* chooses to consider that the act of individuals of the British nation, where they are free to act, is the act of their government, we are not bound to alter our conduct, but ought rather to abide firmly the consequences of his error.

The mass of mankind, who are always more practical than speculative, will estimate more highly this last occupation of Lord Byron's life than all his poetry. He has indeed thus put the *sincerity* of his politics beyond all question; he has shown himself, in *action* as well as in *thought*, a patriot of the highest and most extended glory. And it is the more fortunate for *his* poetical fame, and the fame of *all* poetry, because it interests so many in cherishing his memory, and holding sacred his name, who are insensible to the charms and refinements of the Muse.

And now I come to a more difficult

task than any which I have hitherto encountered on this subject: — it may be required that I should give a summary of Lord Byron's character, and concentrate the scattered rays which have been thrown so irregularly among so many letters into one compact whole. But I shall avoid this: — I have already given my opinions on the principles of poetry in so many places and so many forms and changes of words, that to repeat any one of them to the exclusion of the rest would but weaken the effect, and leave some shade and distinction unnoticed, which may be necessary for a due estimate of Lord Byron's genius.

Johnson, in his *Life of Pope*, has laid down the constituents of poetical genius, and then asked triumphantly, "If these "be true, whether Pope had not a high "poetical genius?" I refer to what I have said on the principles of poetry,

and then ask the same question with regard to Lord Byron.

It is easy to frame principles which shall meet the character of the object selected for praise; it is necessary, therefore, to examine the principles with jealousy and severity, especially in these days, when new-fangled doctrines so very generally prevail. But it will not be found that I differ from Johnson in principles; it is, indeed, always dangerous to differ from him, wherever he puts forth his strength as he has done in the lives of Pope, Dryden, Milton, and Cowley.

I shall be asked in what exact place or degree of the poetical roll of our country I put Lord Byron. This is one of the questions on poets which I am always inclined to resist. It is scarcely possible in many cases to fix precedence among those who have taken different routes, and cannot, therefore, be strictly compared. No one who has undertaken

to do this has ever satisfied others. If I attempt this in the case of Lord Byron, I am quite sure that I shall be blamed by a thousand tongues both for placing him too high and too low. I have not indeed any confidence that it is not yet too early, when our grief is so recent, for the calm exercise of a judgment that shall stand the test of time.

We may safely pronounce that our three greatest poetical names are *Milton*, *Shakspeare*, and *Spenser* : — the contest begins with the next name. *Pope* and *Dryden* are the two between whom it is commonly supposed to lie : others have named *Chaucer*, and others even *Gray* and *Collins*. Mr. Bowles, according to his own principles, ought to name *Thomson*. The principles advocated by Lord Byron himself in his *Strictures* (on Bowles's *Criticisms*) would, in the unqualified extent in which he lays them down, put *Pope* next to *Shakspeare*, if not *first* of

the list; but he evidently wrote under some momentary impulse, and had not duly considered the subject.

I am myself inclined, — with some hesitation, yet sincerely, — to put Lord Byron himself next to *Spenser*. I am not unprepared for the wonder and clamour which this opinion will produce from certain schools of poetry, and certain classes of readers, religious, moral, political, classical, and fashionable. But either those principles of poetry which have been admitted from the time of Homer to the *close* of the *last* century are wrong, or this opinion, if not without some remnant of doubt, stands upon arguments and deductions so difficult to be refuted, and of such prevalent force, that prejudice alone will resist it as unfounded and ridiculous.

It may be said in favour of *Pope*, that no poet ever before exhibited so much of the perfection of the *art;* yet that in

Eloisa it does not, in the smallest degree, lessen the poetical fire and beauty of the matter. Lord Byron has never carried *art* half so far; (indeed art is not one of his excellences;) — nor can I venture to say, that he has exceeded the poetical merit of the *matter* of Eloisa. Limiting ourselves then to this point of view, *Pope* is superior to him. But we are bound to look a little farther, and weigh the *mass* of the merits of one against the *mass* of the merits of the other. Pope had certainly neither the same variety, nor the same originality, nor does he so commonly live in poetical regions and among poetical beings. There is scarcely any composition of Lord Byron which is not poetical: — at least three-fourths of Pope's verses have no poetry in them. Pope could be a poet on great occasions, when his passions were roused to unwonted energies, and his ambition took a proper course.

His habits were those of a *philosophical versifier*, — a moralist, an observer of life and manners, who put prosaic subjects and a prosaic manner of treating them, into excellent metre, terse expressions, and pointed forms. He had good sense, sober reason, and strong penetration into the characters which bustle on the public stage of life; but he seldom indulged himself in the higher flights of imagination, — in contemplating and painting the more visionary beauties of ideal excellency, or in the intense feelings which such ideal beauties excite. Wherever poetry does only that which prose can do; — wherever its merit differs from a rational and able book of prose only in the metre, surely it cannot entitle its author to a high place among poets: such parts, therefore, of Pope's writings as have no merits but these must never be put into the scale when pre-eminence is claimed for him. Had his style been

always poetical, (which it was not,) I can never put the poetry of *expression* in competition with the poetry of *matter*. — Lord Byron's was always the poetry of matter: he was even careless of style; yet his matter alone often gave *unsought* excellence to his style.

Epic poetry is considered to form the first class; and Lord Byron can scarcely be said to have written an *epic* poem, if the definition of the *Dictionnaire de Trevoux* be right. "ÉPIQUE, *qui appartient à la poësie héroïque, ou poëme qui décrit quelque action, signalée d'un héros. Le poëme* ÉPIQUE *est un discours inventé avec art pour former les mœurs par des instructions déguisées sous les allégories d'une action importante, racontée d'une manière vraisemblable et merveilleuse. La différence qu'il y a entre la poëme* ÉPIQUE *et la tragédie, c'est que dans la poëme épique les personnes n'y sont point introduites aux yeux des spectateurs agissant*

par elles-mêmes comme dans la tragédie ; mais l'action est racontée par le poëte."

Yet under this definition, perhaps, many would put *The Corsair*. And some critics (among the rest Edward Phillips) consider every narrative poem to be EPIC, whether *heroic* or not. They who are of this last opinion must give up the necessary priority of rank which is claimed for the *epic*. And in this sense Lord Byron is almost always *epic ;* for he is almost always *narrative*, except in his *dramas*. And *narrative-poetry* is the most natural, the least likely to fall into corruptions and the empty fantasticalities of style, the best test of the true faculty of invention, and most capable of interesting the simplest and least factitious tastes. Pope was scarce ever a narrative-poet, except in his mock-heroics and his translations. *Dryden*'s fame must rest principally on his powers as a narrative-poet; for though he *bor-*

rowed the outline of *all* his stories, much of the detail and colouring of many of them was his own invention. Though the spiritual parts of poetry are beautiful by themselves, when standing alone in *lyric* pieces, yet they are still more beautiful when intermingled in *tales*, by which the reader has been previously worked up into a proper temperament to receive them, and where they re-act on the parts of the tale which follow.

Madame de Staël and others have divided poetry into the *classical* and the *romantic;* but the latter is commonly used to confound very different sorts of poetry, both in their origin and in their constituents. It belongs properly to the school of *the Troubadours*, — the school of chivalry and amorous gallantry. It is used to confound with it the *Gothic*, the *German*, and every sort of extravagance. The *Italian* school grew out of the strictly *romantic;*

the *French* school from the less enthusiastic and less imaginative character of its people, and the prevalence of *esprit* which marks the *French* genius, early came *nearer* to the *classical* model: (I do not say *near*, for it commonly wants *elevation* and *fancy* as well as *invention*).

Lord Byron was of *none* of these schools, but he took advantage of all, which it is the very *essence* of genius to do. He could compose in a classical manner; witness his *Lament of Tasso:* if there be not, indeed, in that piece more passion, more sentiment, more depth of colouring than any classical poem of antiquity can show. But after the lapse of two thousand years, so many extraordinary events, so many changes of opinions and manners, he did not refuse any additional materials adapted to poetry which time had furnished. But he scorned to be an echo of chivalrous tales, when the opinions, prejudices,

and attachments of chivalry had ceased: he scorned to repeat, with childish wonder, superstitions which no longer had influence on the popular belief: if he is supposed to allude to the mysteries and magic of which Germany is so fond, it was only where, from whatever cause, it had got a dominion over his own mind. Manliness and directness characterise every thing which he wrote. I do not recollect a passage of affectation in all his works, after the termination of the *second* canto of *Childe Harold.* Up to that date he did not entirely trust to himself; nor, indeed, did he always in *The Giaour;* but there it never, I think, fell into affectation: — very seldom before that publication. *Affectation,* when it prevails in any degree, is a vital sin, totally inconsistent with eminent merit, or with any merit which can secure a permanent fame.

I say, then, that Lord Byron is neither of the *classical* nor *romantic* school; but that he shows what poetry itself, which is of no school, could do, under the direction of a mighty genius, vast energies, deep sensibility, and intense passions, with the materials offered to it at the commencement of the nineteenth century.

It is said of Lord Byron, that he always had some particle of reality, some actual experience, to ground all his imaginations and visions upon; that he never wrote, but from positive and unsought excitement; and that on no occasion did he ever attempt cold, sickly, flowery, artificial invention.

Let us see which we could spare of Lord Byron's poems! *Three* or *four*, perhaps, and a great many particular passages of *Don Juan;* but what a chasm we should make in the fruits of our national genius, if the rest were withdrawn.

He has thrown into the shade so many who formerly had attractions, that, perhaps, we should sink again to be content with *mediocrity;* for his fire and vigour have made many poems, which formerly were deemed to have animation and spirit, appear tame and insipid! Such, at least, has been the effect on *me.* I could name instances, were it not invidious.

If Lord Byron be of all modern poets he whom we can least spare, this alone is surely magnificent praise. If I add that he is the poet whom we could least have spared at any time since the death of *Milton*, then it cannot be answered, that he is only comparatively missed among the twinkling lights of *our* days! Not that all are *twinkling;* for in the last sixty years we have had many noble poets, and have some still surviving, though they have taken a different route from

Lord Byron. And so I would have them take! — He who treads in the path of another mocks his faults, but never reaches his merits.

LETTER XLI.

July 14.

As the time for concluding these letters has arrived, I must refrain from expatiating a little longer on some points which I think would still admit of elucidation. But I must endeavour to leave the reader with the impression of the grand point I have undertaken to make out; —a point which, it may be said, no one denies, but which yet I find a very large party admit very reluctantly, and rather in fear than in conviction. I wish to leave the point *shortly* put on grounds, which, if false, it is easy to controvert, and if true, will allow of no answer.

I assert it to be undeniable, that poetry is excellent in proportion to its degree of *that poetical* INVENTION *which is sublime, pathetic, or beautiful.* Now I do not contend that *Childe Harold* is poetical

invention; neither the description of particular scenery, nor the portraits of particular persons, nor the relation of the incidents of actual observation and experience, can be invention: they may be reflected brilliantly by the faculty of a splendid fancy. So far, then, Lord Byron would not have been entitled to sit on the *upper* seat of the Temple of Parnassus.

But he has other poems which exhibit this quality with so much certainty, and in so very eminent a degree, as to give him an undoubted claim to an upper seat. *The Corsair*, *Lara*, *Manfred*, *Lament of Tasso*, the *Dramas*, *Prophecy of Dante*, *Cain*, *Heaven and Earth*, (not to say *Don Juan*,) abound every where with that poetical INVENTION, which is sublime, pathetic, or beautiful. It is not inconsistent with the most perfect poetical invention that the *outline* should be historical, or founded in fact: "some

" brief, obscure, or remote tradition, where " there is an ample field to enlarge by " feigning of probable circumstances." This is precisely what Lord Byron has done in most of these poems: the details and colouring are all his own. And let us appeal, not to a few, but to all minds, which join education to the least degree of native feeling and native talent, whether these poems do not display, — not merely here and there, but throughout, — passages either of such grandeur, such intense tenderness, or such vividness, elegance, and grace, as

> ——————— " take the prison'd soul,
> And lap it in Elysium."

The expression, too, is almost always exquisite; but that is their least attraction. The censorious may say what they will of *Cain;* but there are speeches in the mouth of *Cain* and *Ada*, especially regarding their child, which nothing in

English poetry but the "wood-notes "wild" of *Shakspeare* ever equalled.

And here I will leave this question, without weakening it by more distinctions and qualifications. Unless the positions here laid down can be overturned, there is no room for farther controversy.

"And now my task is smoothly done,
I can fly, or I can run,
Quickly to the green earth's end,
Where the bow'd welkin low doth bend;
And from thence can soar as soon
To the corners of the moon.
Mortals, that would follow me,
Love Virtue; she alone is free:
She can teach ye how to climb
Higher than the sphery chime:
Or if Virtue feeble were,
Heaven itself would stoop to her." *

* Comus.

NOTE.

GEORGE GORDON BYRON, *sixth* LORD BYRON, was born 22d January, 1788. He was only son of John Byron, born 1756, by his second wife, Catharine Gordon, of Aberdeenshire, who died in August, 1811. He lost his father on 11th June, 1793, in his sixth year. His grandfather, the well-known Commodore John Byron, born 1723, died 1786, aged 63. The *Narrative* of his shipwreck on an uninhabited island of the South Seas, when a midshipman of the *Wager*, one of Lord Anson's squadron, long remained a volume of extraordinary popularity. It was published in 1768. He was promoted to the rank of admiral in 1775, and distinguished himself in the American war. He was younger brother of William, *fifth* Lord Byron, on whose

death, 19th May, 1798, his grandson, the poet, succeeded to the peerage, at the age of ten years.

Till that period the poet had passed almost all his childhood in *Aberdeenshire*. He was now brought out of Scotland and sent to Harrow school. About 1805, he was removed to (Trinity College) Cambridge. In 1806, he published his *Hours of Idleness*, on which the very extraordinary criticism in the *Edinburgh Review*, Vol. XI. (*January*, 1808,) has eventually caused so much surprise; and operated at the time, and, perhaps, through life, so importantly on the mind of the poet. It gave rise to his *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, 1808.

Soon after he came of age, he left England on his travels to Spain, Portugal, and Greece, and did not return till about the beginning of 1812, when he gave to the world the first two cantos of *Childe Harold*. He then published, in rapid succession, 2. *The Giaour*. 3. *The Bride of Abydos*. 4. *The Corsair* (January, 1813). 5. *Lara* (1814). 6. *The Siege of Corinth and Parisina*.

On 2d January, 1815, he married *Anne Isabella*, only child of Sir *Ralph Milbank*, Bart., by Judith, sister and co-heir (and heir of entail) to Thomas Noel, second and last Viscount Wentworth, and by her had an only child, born 10th December, 1815.

In the following year a legal separation took place between him and Lady Byron; and in April, 1816, he embarked a second time for the Continent, never to return. He passed by the *Rhine* to Geneva, where he passed the summer of that year in *Campagne Diodati*, in the village of *Coligny*, on the Savoy side of the Lake, with the *Alps* behind him, and the *Jura*, cross the Lake, in his front. At Geneva, he wrote, 7. The third canto of *Childe Harold*. 8. *Manfred*. 9. *The Prisoner of Chillon*.

At the end of this year he passed on to *Venice*, where he long took up his abode, making excursions into the south of Italy, as far as *Rome*. Here he wrote, 10. His fourth canto of *Childe Harold*. 11. *Lament of Tasso*. 12. *Beppo*. 13. *Marino Faliero*. 14. *The Two Foscari*. 15. The earlier cantos of *Don Juan*.

About the end of 1819, he removed to *Ravenna*, where he wrote, 16. *The Prophecy of Dante;* and, perhaps, 17. *Cain.* 18. *Sardanapalus.* 19. Other cantos of *Don Juan.* 20. His *Strictures on Bowles.*

In the latter end of 1821, he removed to *Pisa*, in Tuscany. But, perhaps, he had already sent for publication, 21. His *Heaven and Earth.* Here he wrote, 22. *Werner.* 23. *The Deformed Transformed.* 24. Other cantos of *Don Juan.* Here, in July, 1822, he lost his friend *Shelley*, by the upsetting of an open boat in a storm, returning from Leghorn to Lerica.

He remained at *Pisa* till 1823, when he went to Greece, where a fever carried him off, in the prime of his genius, on 19th April, 1824.

His character and his genius I have endeavoured to delineate in the preceding Letters. He was great-great-great-grandson of Richard, second Lord Byron, who died 1679, ætat. seventy-four; and whose elder brother, Sir John,

was raised to the peerage, (with a collateral remainder,) 24th October, 1643. William, third peer, died 1695: — William, fourth peer, (the poet's great grandfather) died 1736.

THE END.

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